

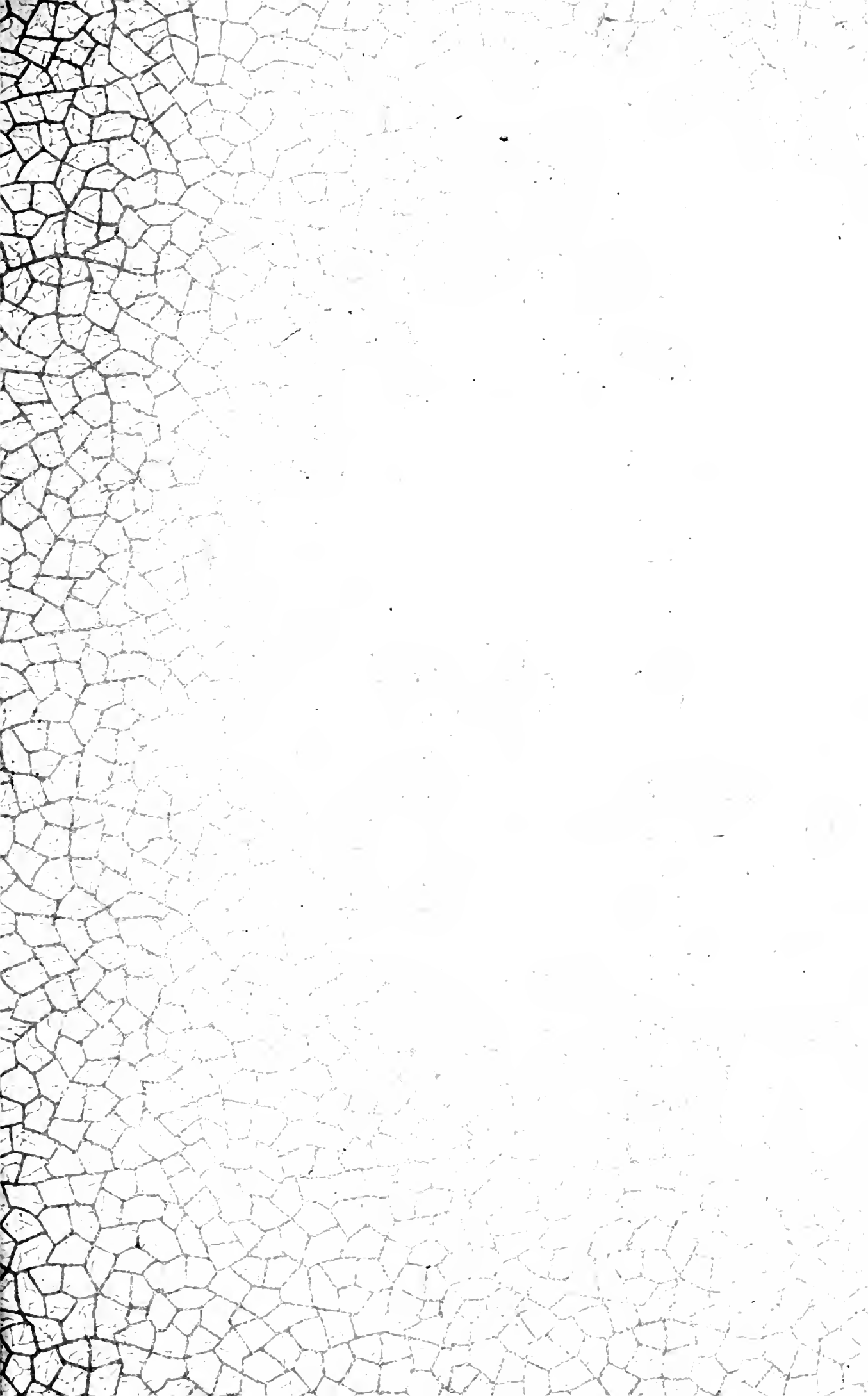
A BANKRUPT HEART

By
FLORENCE MARRYAT



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A BANKRUPT HEART.

VOL. III.

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A BANKRUPT HEART.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

‘LOVE’S CONFLICT,’ ‘MY OWN CHILD,’ ‘PARSON JONES,’
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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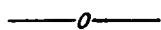
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CHAPTER I.

BUT as she looked at Nell, Nora saw a stain of blood showing through the sleeve of her light print dress.

‘But you *are* hurt. You are bleeding!’ she exclaimed with horror. ‘Oh, I *am* so sorry. What can I do for you?’

Nell regarded the blood-stain with calm indifference.

‘It is nothing, my lady. I presume I am speaking to Lady Bowmant,’ she added, with a courtesy that struck Nora as uncommon with her class.

‘Oh, no, I am not Lady Bowmant. I am only one of her visitors. I was driving with her, and she went into a

cottage and left me with the carriage, and these two little brutes ran away with me. But how am I to get them home? I dare not take the reins again for my life. How far is it to the Hall?’

‘Oh, the Hall is only round the corner, madam,’ answered Nell; ‘I would help you to lead them, but—’ Here she hesitated, not knowing how to proceed; then, as if a sudden thought had struck her, she stood on tip-toe and looked over the hedge and called loudly, ‘Tom.’

‘Yes, miss,’ replied a hedger coming at her call.

‘Come round here at once and lead these horses up to the Hall for this lady. They are beyond her control.’ Then addressing Nora, she continued—‘You had better get in again, madam, and this man will see you safely to the Hall. You will want to send the carriage back for Lady Bowmant.’

‘Oh, yes, indeed. What will she think of my disappearing in this extraordinary manner? Thank you so much. I don’t

know what I should have done without your assistance. But I am so troubled about your arm. I am sure you are horribly hurt,' said Nora, as she mounted into the dog-cart.

'Please don't say anything more about it,' replied Nell; 'at the worst it will only be a bruise; you need not be afraid now, madam. This man is rough, but he understands horses, and is very steady.'

And so saying Nell slipped through a break in the hedge and was gone.

Lady Ilfracombe arrived safely at the Hall, and a groom was at once despatched to pick up Lady Bowmant, whom he met half-way between old Farley's cottage and the house, laughing heartily to herself over the disappearance of her friend and her carriage, having made a shrewd guess that Beau and Belle had taken her home, whether she would or not. The occurrence formed the chief topic of conversation at the luncheon-table, and Nora was full of the beautiful country girl she had met and who had shown so much courage in stopping the runaway cobs.

‘I must make her some little acknowledgment of the service she rendered me, mustn’t I, Ilfracombe?’ she asked her husband. ‘I might have been killed, if it hadn’t been for her, and, or still worse, smashed Lady Bowmant’s pretty trap.’

‘Of course you must, darling,’ replied the earl. ‘We can never repay her for what she did for us.’

‘But I don’t know her name!’ exclaimed Nora, ‘though I suppose she lives somewhere over the way, because she ordered the old hedger to lead the cobs home, as if he were her servant. Oh, she is such a pretty young woman. Her face is perfectly lovely. I think it was because I was so occupied gazing at her, that I forgot to ask her name.’

‘A very pretty girl,’ repeated Sir Archibald. ‘I think that must be one of the Llewellyns. They’re the prettiest girls for a good many miles round Usk. Isn’t that the case, Dolly?’ he said, addressing his wife.

‘Well, I’ve only seen the married one,’ she

replied, but I know they bear that reputation. The father is a very handsome old man.'

At the name of Llewellyn, Lady Ilfracombe looked up quickly, and the earl and Jack Portland exchanged glances with each other.

'What is there in that to surprise you?' demanded their host, mistaking the meaning of their looks. 'Wales is rather celebrated for beauty, you know; at least we won't allow that England, Ireland or Scotland can hold a candle to us in that respect.'

Ilfracombe did not seem disposed to answer, so Jack Portland took upon himself to be spokesman.

'I have not the slightest doubt of your superiority, Sir Archibald,' he said, 'and was not the least surprised to hear you say so. I only thought I had heard the name before.'

'What! of Llewellyn? *I* should be surprised if you had not. We are all Llewellyns, or Owens, or Lewises, or Thomases in Wales. It's one of the

commonest names here. I've about half a dozen Llewellyns amongst my tenants. But this man's daughters are really uncommonly handsome. Fine tall girls, with splendidly cut features. By Jove! it's a pleasure to go to the farm only to catch a glimpse of one of them.'

'And that's why you're always going over there then,' cried Lady Bowmant. 'I've caught you at last, my gentleman. No more Panty-cuckoo Farm for you. I'll take good care of that.'

'Panty-cuckoo Farm! Is that where my rustic beauty lives?' exclaimed Nora. 'What a fanciful name! What does it mean? Panty-cuckoo.'

'The dell of the cuckoo, or the cuckoo's dell,' replied Lady Bowmant. 'Yes, isn't it pretty? It's the farm just across the road, where Mr Portland and Mr Lennox sleep. Mrs Llewellyn is a dear old woman. I always go to her in any perplexity. She supplies us with all the extra eggs and chickens and butter we may want. Lady Ilfracombe, you *should* see her dairy; it's a

perfect picture, and everything about the farm is so quaint and old, and so faultlessly clean and neat. She and her husband are quite model tenants. I always take my friends to pay them a visit.'

After luncheon, when the rest of the party had separated to pursue their own devices, Nora crept after her husband.

'Ilfracombe,' she whispered, 'supposing this should be one of *her* sisters?'

'Whose? What are you talking about?' he said rather curtly.

'You know. The Miss Llewellyn you have told me of.'

'What will you get into your head next? What likelihood is there of such a thing? Who ever said she had any sisters, or came from Usk? Didn't you hear Sir Archibald say the place was peopled with Llewellyns? Please don't get any absurd fancies into your head. The name is distasteful to me as it is? I wish we had not heard it. Now, I suppose there will be a grand fuss made of the service this girl rendered you, and the whole family

will be paraded out for our special benefit. You have been a good friend to me in this business, Nora. Get me out of this unnecessary annoyance, if you can.'

'Of course, I will,' replied his wife readily. 'You sha'n't be bothered if I can help it, Ilfracombe. You were a dear, good boy to make a clean breast to me of the matter, and I'll see you don't suffer for it. I must remunerate the young woman or her parents for what she did this morning, so I'll just go to the farm this afternoon by myself and get it quietly over. How much should I offer her? What do you think? Will five pounds be enough?'

'I think so; but that is as you feel about it. But Nora, darling, you needn't mention our names, need you? We shall be gone probably before they have a chance of finding out anything about us, and though I don't suppose there is any chance of their being related to—to—*her*—yet if they should be—you understand?'

Lady Ilfracombe went up to her husband and kissed his anxious face.

‘I understand,’ she replied, and then left the room. There was a slight summer shower that afternoon, and the rest of the Hall party had already settled themselves to spend it indoors. A noisy set were occupied in the billiard-room, chatting and laughing over their game, and the more respectable scandalmongers were working, reading, and taking away their neighbours’ characters in the seclusion of the drawing-room. Lady Ilfracombe donned a large straw hat, and, taking an umbrella in her hand, set forth for Panty-cuckoo Farm without observation. She soon found her way through the white gate, and down the hilly slope, and found the latched wicket that guarded the bricked pathway up to the house. As soon as she placed her hand upon the latch, Mrs Llewellyn, as was her custom at the approach of any visitors, came quickly forward to save her the trouble of opening it, and give her a welcome to Panty-cuckoo Farm.

‘Walk in, my lady,’ she exclaimed cordially. ‘This way, if you please,’ and ushering Nora into the parlour she dusted a chair with her apron, and set it before her.

‘Oh, what a lovely room,’ cried Nora enthusiastically, as she gazed around her. ‘What dear old carved oak. Why, it must be centuries old; and what beautiful china. Don’t leave me here alone, pray, or I shall steal half your things. I suppose you are Mrs Llewellyn. Well, you have the very jolliest room I ever saw in my life.’

Mrs Llewellyn was completely won over by this praise. She was very proud, as has been said before, of her room and oak and china, and nothing pleased her better than to see them appreciated.

‘Many have told me so before, ma’am; but I am glad you like them. My husband and I have been offered pounds and pounds sometimes for these very things by the ladies and gentlemen who have visited Usk; but we could never make up our minds to sell them. They belonged to

our great-great-grandparents, and there they will be till our time comes to leave them behind us for the benefit of our daughters.'

'Your daughters, Mrs Llewellyn. That reminds me of the purpose of my visit to you. A young woman, whom I believe to be one of your daughters, did me a very great service this morning. She stopped a pair of runaway horses for me, and saved, perhaps, my life.'

'Ay, that was my eldest girl. She told us of it; but it is nothing to make a fuss about, ma'am. Country girls are more used to do such things than town ladies. There's not a girl in Usk but what would do her best to stop a horse. I hope you weren't hurt at all yourself, ma'am?'

'Not a bit; but your daughter was. I saw the blood-stain on the sleeve of her dress. I am afraid the horse touched her arm with his hoof when he threw her down.'

'It can't be over much,' said Mrs Llewellyn quietly, 'for she never said anything to me about it, though now you

mention it, ma'am, I *did* notice a bit of blood on her sleeve too. Lor', it's nothing. I thought she got it in the henhouse maybe, or the larder. It isn't worth speaking of.'

'But I am quite of a different opinion I can assure you, Mrs Llewellyn, and I came over expressly to tell you so. May I see your daughter? Is she in the house?'

'Certainly, ma'am, if you wish it. I'll send her to you at once, and perhaps you would do us the honour to take a cup of tea whilst you wait. Lady Bowmant, she always has a cup of tea when she comes here. She says she has quite a fancy for our cream.'

'I will with pleasure, Mrs Llewellyn. Indeed I have heard such grand accounts of your famous dairy that I am quite anxious to taste its produce.'

The farmer's wife bridled under the compliment, and turned with the intention of leaving the room; but as she reached the door she said,—

'May I take the liberty of asking your name, madam?'

Nora was just about to give her maiden name, remembering her husband's injunction, when she noticed she had withdrawn the glove of her left hand, and displaying her wedding-ring and jewelled keepers, so with her quick wit, which never found her at a disadvantage, she borrowed the name of one of the ladies, who was even at that moment taking away hers in the Hall drawing-room, and answered, 'Mrs Lumley.'

'Thank you, madam,' said the old woman, as she curtsied and withdrew. In another moment she was adjuring Nell to go down to the parlour and hear what the lady from the Hall had to say to her.

'Oh, mother, why did you say I was indoors?' she exclaimed fretfully. 'What should she want to see me for? You know how I hate seeing strangers.'

'Well, my lass, it is not my fault. The lady, Mrs Lumley is her name, wants to thank you for what you did this morning, and for my part I think it is very pretty-

mannered of her to come over herself when she might have written to express her gratitude. But here she is, and you must go down and see her whilst I make her a cup of tea. She says she heard so much of our dairy that she's quite anxious to taste our cream. She's as nice-spoken a young lady as ever I met, and I'm sure she has good intentions towards you.'

'But I don't *want* to be thanked,' repeated Nell in the same tone. 'It was the simplest thing in the world; anyone would have done it. I only caught at the reins as the horses passed me. What does she want to make a fuss about it for? Its over and done with. Why can't she leave it alone?'

'Well, my lass, I can't stay to answer all your testy questions. I must go and see that the kettle boils for the tea. Now, go down, there's a good girl. She's one of the Hall guests, and we mustn't offend them, you know.'

So Nell smoothed her rippling hair, and

went down to the parlour with a bad grace, and stood just inside the door, stiff as a soldier on duty, and without speaking a word. But Nora did not seem to perceive her mood. She thought her stiffness was meant for respect.

‘Oh, Miss Llewellyn,’ she began, ‘I’ve come over expressly to see you, and thank you better than I could this morning for the great service you rendered me. Don’t stand there, pray, but come here and sit down by me, and let me tell you how brave and courageous and good I think you were to do so much for a stranger.’

Nell’s haughty shyness was overcome by the cordiality of her new acquaintance. She sat down as she was asked to do, but not a feature of her beautiful face relaxed. She could not forget that she was speaking to a visitor from the Hall—that place which she had so much dreaded since she knew that Mr Portland was staying there.

‘I can’t see the particular courage of it, Mrs Lumley,’ she replied. ‘I was sauntering along inside the hedge looking for some

of my mother's turkey poults that had strayed from the yard when your horses came tearing along, and I put out my hand mechanically to stop them. You are making too much of my action—indeed you are. Tom was only a few yards further on, clipping the hedges. He would have stopped them, and better than I did, and not been rolled so ignominiously in the dust,' and Nell could not help smiling at the recollection.

'Ah, and you were kicked or something!' exclaimed Nora; 'I saw the blood on your arm. And yet you will say it was of no consequence.'

Nell rolled up the sleeve of her print dress, exposing her white, smooth arm. There was a long graze on it, and it was beginning to get discoloured.

'That is all,' she said contemptuously. 'You don't call *that* anything.'

'But indeed I do,' said Nora; 'and it was ever so good of you to incur it for my sake. Besides, you don't consider the risk you ran. Because you happened to

get off with a few bruises, it doesn't follow that it was not quite as brave of you to risk getting your leg broken or your head run over. And there is no saying what you did not save me from. No, no, Miss Llewellyn, you shall not put me off that way. You must let me offer you some little remuneration for your timely help. Don't imagine I think any money can repay you for it, but perhaps you will buy yourself some little present to remind you of this day, and how grateful I am to you.'

And Nora placed the five-pound note gently in Nell's hand as she spoke. Nell never opened it. It might have been for fifty pounds for aught she knew, but she took it up, folded as it was, and replaced it on her companion's lap.

'No, thank you, Mrs Lumley,' she said quietly. 'You mean it kindly, I know, and I appreciate your intention, but I cannot take money from you for so slight a thing. My father would not like it; we are not in need of it, and I shall remem-

ber you and to-day quite well without it.'

Nora felt hurt and annoyed—not with Nell, but herself. She ought to have known better than to offer such a very superior sort of young woman money. It was thoughtless of her — unpardonable. She thrust the offending bank-note into her pocket, and turning, took Nell's hand.

'Forgive me,' she said, just as if she had known her for years. 'I have been a fool. I ought to have seen that you were above such paltry considerations. You don't look like a farmer's daughter to me. You seem as if you had been used to such much better things. Have you lived in Usk all your life?'

'No, not all my life,' said Nell.

'Have you been a governess, then, or anything of that sort? You seem to have had such a very superior education,' remarked Nora.

'Do you think so?' replied Nell.

She certainly seemed a very difficult

sort of young woman to get on with. Nora hardly knew how to proceed. But then a sudden thought struck her (for hers was a generous nature), and hastily drawing a sapphire ring off her finger, she tried to put it on one of Nell's. It was one that the earl had given her—that he had been accustomed to wear himself. It was what is called a gipsy ring—a broad band of gold, in which three unusually fine, dark-blue, flawless sapphires were sunk—the only ring which Ilfracombe had worn before his marriage. He had put it on Nora's finger at Malta as soon as he was engaged to her, as proxy for one better suited to her slender hand, and she had refused to give it up again. Now it struck her that it would be just the sort of ring to present to a young woman whose hands were rather large and used to rough work. So she tried to put it on the third finger of Nell's left hand.

‘They say it is unlucky to wear a ring on your wedding-finger till you are mar-

ried,' she said, laughing; 'but I am sure, Miss Llewellyn, you are far too sensible a girl to mind an old superstition.'

'But what are you doing?' asked Nell sharply, as she drew her hand away. There, on her finger glittered the ring she knew so well—had seen so often on the hand of her lover in the olden days. She gazed at it for a moment, fascinated as a bird by the eye of a snake; and then, with a sharp cry, she dragged the jewel off again, and it rolled under the table and along the polished oak floor.

'Oh, my poor ring,' cried the countess, somewhat offended at this determined repulse.

'Whose is it? Where did you get it?' exclaimed Nell, as she rose to her feet with flashing eyes and trembling limbs.

'Where did I get it?' echoed Nora, with amazement. 'Why, I bought it, of course. Where should I have got it?'

'No, you didn't!' said Nell, panting. 'It was given to you!'

'What an extraordinary girl you are,'

replied Nora, as she stooped to recover her ring. 'If it *were* given to me, you may be sure I have every right to pass it on to you if I choose. But what makes you say so?'

'*Who* gave it you?' asked Nell, without apologising for her strange behaviour.

'My husband.' replied Nora, without thinking.

'Your husband? Mr Lumley? And from whom did *he* get it then?' persisted the farmer's daughter.

'Really, I don't see what right you have to question me after this fashion,' said Nora. 'I don't know whom he got it from. The jewellers, I suppose. But pray don't let us say another word upon the subject. It is evident that, instead of giving you pleasure, I have done just the other thing. All my stupidity, I suppose. I thought, as you would not take money, that the ring would have been more acceptable to you, but I was mistaken. Now, pray don't be angry. Let us drop the subject altogether. Ah, here

comes your mother with the tea-tray. Mrs Llewellyn, your daughter and I have been having quite a little quarrel over this affair. She won't take money from me, and she won't take a present, so I don't know what to do. Perhaps you will be able to make her a little more reasonable after I have gone.'

'Ah, ma'am, she's very queer at times, poor lass,' said Mrs Llewellyn, for Nell had taken the occasion of her entrance to escape to the upper storey again. 'She's been so pulled-down and weakened by the fever, that father and I say we hardly know her. Sometimes I think she'll never be the same girl again as she was before she left home. But you mustn't think nothing more about giving her a present, ma'am. What she did for you, you was most heartily welcome to, as her father would say, too, if he was here. Sir Archibald has been a good landlord to us for many years past; and if he hadn't taken it into his head to raise the rent, we shouldn't have anything to say against

him. But pray let me give you a cup of tea, ma'am, with cream and sugar to your liking.'

And, over the discussion of Mrs Llewellyn's excellent tea, Nell and her abrupt behaviour were spoken of no more. But Lady Ilfracombe, though she did not like to vex the earl by mentioning the subject to him, could not banish it from her mind for some time afterwards.

CHAPTER II.

WHILST Nora was walking thoughtfully back to the Hall, Nell was raging up and down the circumscribed limits of her bedroom, with her heart and brain in a tumult of suspicion and suspense. ‘The ring! the ring!’ was all she could say to herself. It *was* the earl’s ring, she was sure of that—she had always seen it on his finger—had so often drawn it off playfully, and placed it on her own. She recognised the very colour of the sapphires; they were so darkly blue, and yet clear as a summer sea; she remembered Lord Ilfracombe having told her the gems were flawless, and had been presented in another form by an Eastern potentate to some ancestor of his, who had been Governor-General of India. She would have sworn to them amongst a

thousand! How then had this woman, this Mrs Lumley, got hold of them? Was she a friend of Ilfracombe's, and had he given them to her? Nell thought it unlikely. The earl had never been a *cavalier des dames*; besides, he was married now, and his family heirlooms belonged to his wife. At that her thoughts flew to Mr Portland. *He* was at the bottom of the mystery perhaps. He had obtained the jewel from Lord Ilfracombe, either by an appeal to the latter's generosity, or by his odious habit of gambling, laid a bet with the earl about it, or won it as a stake. And then he must have given it to this lady—this Mrs Lumley. What was she to him then? Was their combined presence at the Hall by accident or design? Nell thirsted to learn the truth of it. She felt it a desecration to have seen *his* ring on the hand of another person, and to have had it offered to herself in that careless fashion, as if it were of no intrinsic value. The ring that she had known for so long—that had been clasped

in her hand by day—that she had lain with her head on by night. Poor Nell sobbed aloud in the agony of remembrance as she recalled the fact that she had no further part nor lot in it. It was something more than mere suspicion that was worrying her. We have a sixth sense, called intuition, which, as a rule, we pay too little attention to. The influences to which we have been subject, the experiences we have passed through, all leave a subtle something behind them, which is patent to the intuition of our acquaintances, as theirs is to us. We may not recognise it, but it guides, in a great measure, our feelings and ideas, our likes and dislikes. It was intuition that drew Lady Ilfracombe to Panty-cuckoo Farm, and made her conceive such an unusual interest in Nell Llewellyn. It was intuition that made Nell shrink from the friendly advances of the woman who had supplanted her in the affections of her lover, and burn to discover the reason that she was in possession of his ring.

It was fate—the fate that, laugh at it or despise it as we will, still goes on silently but surely, weaving the web of all our destinies—that had drawn these actors in the tragedy of life together to one meeting-place, to fulfil the appointed end of the drama which they had written for themselves. The Countess of Ilfracombe went back to Usk Hall rather depressed than otherwise, for it is not pleasant to have an intended kindness thrown back in your face; and intuition told her that there was something more beneath the surface of Nell's manner than she chose to let her know; and Nell Llewellyn was vexed with herself as well as the stranger, because intuition told her that Nora was not at fault, however the circumstances of her life might have become entangled with her own. She wished now that she had not been so hasty, that she had asked a few questions about the ring and where it came from. By that means she might have gained what she so longed for—news of Lord Ilfracombe—without betray-

ing her own indentivity. Now that the opportunity was past, Nell blamed herself, and wished it might come over again. Was it possible that she could bring about another interview with the lady?—induce her once more to speak of her gratitude for the service rendered her—and so bring the conversation round, without direct inquiry, to her refusal of the sapphire ring. Her next thought was, how should she gain speech of Mrs Lumley without encountering Jack Portland? Nell thought it would be pretty safe to visit the Hall in the evening. The beautiful warm nights they were having then were very likely to tempt the ladies of the party to walk about the grounds after dinner, whilst she knew from experience that that was the very time the gentlemen would commence to play billiards or baccarat. If she went that way about eight o'clock that evening she might have a chance of encountering Mrs Lumley; at all events, some force, of which Nell knew not the name, drew her that way, and, as soon as their early

supper was over, she threw a light shawl over her head and stole out, as she told her mother, 'for a breath of fresh air.' The Hall stood on an eminence crowned with wood. To the back of it was a copse of fir trees, which formed an admirable shelter from the north wind, and extended down either side for some distance. It was under cover of this plantation that Nell approached the house. It was not so thick but that she could see from it if anyone was walking in the open grounds that surrounded the Hall, and it was on this plantation, naturally, that the back premises, through which she gained access to Mrs Hody's apartments, looked. The way to it, unless one used the drive, was through some large meadows belonging to the estate, and Nell had traversed the whole length of these and gained the back of the plantation, when she was startled by seeing the figure of a man approaching her. Her first impulse was to turn and fly, forgetting in her simplicity that it was the very mode to attract at-

tention. She had turned her back upon the stranger, and was walking rapidly the other way, when she heard him say,—

‘Don’t let me frighten you away. You are quite welcome to walk here.’

It was the voice of Lord Ilfracombe.

She would have known it amidst the assembled multitudes of earth, and the sound of it made her forget everything but himself. She forgot that he must suppose her to be dead. She forgot that he had voluntarily given her up, that he was a married man—everything but that he was there, and she loved him. At the sound of her lover’s voice, as potent as the trump at the last day to rouse her slumbering soul, Nell turned sharply round, and cried in a tone of ecstasy,—

‘Vernie! Oh, my Vernie!’ and flew towards him.

She was the only person in the world who had ever called him by that name. Lord Ilfracombe’s father had died before he could remember, and ever since his babyhood he had been addressed, as is usual,

by his title only. Even his doting mother and proud sisters had called him nothing else. To everybody, he had been Ilfracombe, and Ilfracombe alone. But when he became intimate with Nell, and took her about occasionally with him to Paris or Rome, it became necessary to use a little discretion, and he had entered their names on the travellers' books and passports as Mr and Mrs Vernon, which was his Christian name. So she had come to call him 'Vernie' as a pet name, and he had let her do it, because it was just as well she should not be shouting 'Ilfracombe' after him wherever they went. But the circumstance had identified her with the name, and when she cried 'Vernie! Oh, my Vernie!' in response to his words, Lord Ilfracombe stood still—petrified, as though he had encountered a voice from heaven.

'Who is it? What do you want?' he answered, trembling.

But Nell left him in no doubt. She came flying to his breast, and threw her

arms round him, and pressed her warm mouth on his, and displayed all the passion she had been wont to do when he returned to her after an absence from home.

‘Vernie, my darling, my own darling!’ she reiterated, gasping for breath, ‘Oh, I did not know you were here—I did not know you were here! My God, I shall die with joy!’

‘Nell!’ he uttered in an awed tone, ‘Nell, is this really you?’

‘Yes, yes, it is I. Who else should it be? Who has ever loved you as your poor Nell?’ and she embraced him anew.

‘But—’ said the earl, incredulously, ‘*who* was drowned then? They told me you were drowned, Nell. How has this mistake arisen, or have I been deceived by design?’

‘Oh, Vernie, I *did* drown myself; that is, I tried to—I wanted to—I felt I could not live, my darling, without you or your love. What was there for me to live for, Vernie, when you were gone?’

All the earl's remorse—all the hard things he had thought of himself, and all the kind thoughts he had had of her, since he had learnt how they parted, rushed back upon his mind now, and he, too, forgot everything, except that his conscience had been relieved from an intolerable burden, and that the woman he held in his arms had loved him faithfully for many years.

He laid his mouth upon hers, and kissed her as warmly in return as ever he had done in the days gone by.

‘Thank God, it is not true!’ he exclaimed. ‘Oh, my poor Nell, I have suffered hell in thinking you had died by your own hand for my sake.’

‘I, too, have been in hell,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, Vernie, why did you leave me? I loved you so.’

‘I was a brute,’ replied the earl, ‘an ungrateful, selfish brute; but I will make you amends for it, if I die.’

What amends could he make her, except by giving her back the love he had seemed to withdraw? Nell thought of no other;

she would have accepted no other. She held her heaven in her arms now—and all the troubles of life had faded away.

‘Your love, your love! I only want your love, Vernie,’ she whispered.

‘You have it, darling. You always had it,’ replied Ilfracombe, as he gazed at the lovely face upturned to his in the moonlight. ‘But how thin and pale you are, Nell. You are not like the same girl. What has happened, dear, to change you so?’

‘I have been ill, Vernie’ answered Nell. ‘I have had a bad fever, and my trouble has done the rest. I have had no peace—no hope without you. I have been unable to eat or sleep. How could I, knowing you had given me up? Oh, Vernie, why didn’t you kill me first? It would have been so much kinder.’

Lord Ilfracombe groaned.

‘God forgive me! I never saw what I had done before this night. Nell, will you ever forgive me, or forget my base ingratitude to you, who were always so good to me? How can you say you

love me? A man like myself is unworthy of any woman's love. You ought by rights to loathe and execrate my very name.'

'But I don't—I don't. I love you still with all my heart and soul. Oh, Vernie, I was so wretched, so miserable, when I came out to walk to-night, and now I'm as happy as the day is long. You love me still. That is all I want to know.'

'But that won't rectify the great wrong I have done you, Nell. That won't replace you in the position my selfishness hurled you from. You forget—perhaps you don't know—that I am—married.'

Nell drew herself a little away from him.

'Oh, yes, I know it,' she said in a low voice; 'but if you love me, Vernie, I have the best part of you still.'

Lord Ilfracombe did not know what to answer. The great emotion—the surprise, almost the shock of finding that Nell still lived, was over now in a great measure, and he had time to remember his wife and how much he loved her (as he had never, even in the flush of his first

passion, loved the poor girl before him), and what *she* would think if she could see and hear him now. The disloyalty of which he was guilty struck him like a cold chill. Was he fated never to be true to any one woman? He relaxed the tight hold he had maintained on Nell, and putting her a little away from him, said gently,—

‘I do love you, my dear; I shall always love you and remember the time we spent together; but my marriage, you see, will prevent my showing it as I used to do.’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’

‘Lady Ilfracombe is very good to me, and deserves all the respect and esteem that I can show her’ (he dared not speak of his love for Nora to the poor wreck who stood so patiently hanging on his words), ‘and when she heard that you were drowned, Nell, she was almost as sorry as myself—’

‘Never mind that,’ interposed Nell, ‘I don’t want to hear about it.’

‘But, of course, the past must be past

now. It cannot come over again. But you must let me provide for your future, Nell. I will not have—it is impossible that you, who have been so near to me, should either work for your living or live without the comforts to which you have been accustomed. It was very naughty of you to refuse the settlement I wished to make upon you—more, it was unkind to me, and when I heard what you had said and done, I was very unhappy.’

‘It was no use, Vernie. I could not take it,’ said Nell.

‘But you will accept it now, darling, won’t you? if only to prove you have forgiven me all the wrong I have done you, and to make me happy too—to wipe out the bitter remorse I have felt—eh, Nell?’

She shook her head.

‘I couldn’t. Don’t ask me. Vernie, my people know nothing of all this—of what you and I were to one another. They think I was just in service in your house, and nothing more. You wouldn’t shame me before them, would you? How

could I account for your giving me an allowance? They would guess the truth at once. Besides, I don't want it. I have everything that I can desire, except your love. And now I have seen you, and know you love me still, I am quite happy, and want nothing more. Oh, God bless you for your kindness to me. Say you love me best of all the world, and the other woman may have your title and your money.'

He could not say what she asked him to do, but he bent down his head again and murmured in her ear,—

'I have told you so, a dozen times. Do you suppose that a few months can make such a difference to a man as that? I could wish things had been otherwise for us, my poor Nell. I wish I had had the courage to marry you years ago. I should have been a happier man than I am ever likely to be now, with the remembrance of your disappointment haunting me like an evil spirit.'

'No, no, it must not haunt you. It is gone,' she exclaimed with womanly un-

selfishness. 'I shall never fret again now I have seen you once more and heard you speak. Kiss me, my Vernie—again—again! Ah, that is sweet. How many, many weary months it is—more than a year—since I have felt your dear lips on my own. It is like a draught of new wine. It has made a strong woman of me.'

'And where are you going now, Nell?' he asked, as she disengaged herself from his clasp.

'To my home—back to Panty-cuckoo Farm,' she replied.

'Ah, it is you, then, who live at Panty-cuckoo Farm? Did you not stop Lady Bowmant's cobs as they were running away this morning.'

'What! they have told *you* too. What an absurd fuss they make of nothing. The lady, Mrs Lumley, was at the farm this afternoon, worrying me about it.'

'*Mrs Lumley!*' he ejaculated, for though Nora had not informed him of her visit, he knew the real Mrs Lumley had not been there. 'What was she like?'

‘A slight, willowy-looking young woman, with quick brown, eyes and pointed features. She was very kind, but she teased me so about taking a reward for doing nothing at all. Why, I didn’t even stop them. They stopped of themselves. All I did was to get myself rolled over in the dust. By the way,’ continued Nell, as a sudden thought struck her, ‘are you very intimate with Mrs Lumley, Vernie?’

‘By no means. Why do you ask?’

‘Because when I told her I couldn’t accept money at her hands, she took a ring off her finger and tried to put it on mine. And it was *your* ring—the gipsy ring set with sapphires—I recognised it directly, and I thought I should have gone mad with puzzling my brain where she got it and if you had given it to her. Did you?’

‘Given my sapphire ring to Mrs Lumley? Most certainly not,’ replied the earl, who guessed at once that his sharp-witted little wife, in order to obey his injunction not to disclose her real name, had borrowed the other

woman's. "By Jove, that was cool of her. I remember now she was fooling with my ring last night and put it on her own finger for a piece of fun. But to offer it to you. Well, I wish you had taken it. She would have looked very foolish when I asked where it was gone, wouldn't she?"

'Oh, Vernie, I couldn't have touched it. It would have burned me. The dear ring I had so often played with myself. I have been crying all the afternoon for thinking of it.'

'Silly girl. I must get you one as like it as I can. But now I am afraid I must return to the house, or some of the fellows may come out to look after me.'

'Ah!' said Nell, with a shudder. 'You have that horrid Mr Portland there. Vernie, you will not tell him you have met me, will you?'

'Certainly not. It is the last thing I should do. But I cannot understand why all you women should seem to take a dislike to dear old Jack. He is the best fellow I know.'

‘Vernie, he was *never* your friend,’ said Nell earnestly. ‘You wouldn’t believe it in the old days. Try to believe it now.’

‘No, Nell I cannot, not till I have some better proofs than another’s word. Lady Ilfracombe is always dinning the same thing into my ears, but without effect. Jack has been always true to me so far as I know, and I speak of a man as I find him.’

‘Vernie,’ said Nell, after a pause, ‘is she fond of you?’

He knew she alluded to his wife, and answered,—

‘I think so. I hope so. If people have to pass their lives together, it is best they should be good friends, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ replied the girl, as she slowly moved away.

He was just going to call out ‘good-night’ to her, when she came back rapidly.

‘Oh, Vernie, she doesn’t love you as *I* did. Tell me that she doesn’t.’

‘No, dear, no,’ he answered gravely. ‘I don’t think she does.’

‘And you don’t love her as you did me?’ she persisted, and again Lord Ilfracombe was able to answer with truth, ‘No.’

She threw her arms passionately round him and inquired,—

‘When shall we meet again? Where can I see you, Vernie? The minutes will seem like hours till then.’

‘Nellie,’ he said seriously, ‘you know it is impossible that we can meet like this in any safety. I am overjoyed—more overjoyed than I can tell you—to find you are living, whom I have mourned as dead; but I am here only for a few days, and my time is not my own. Were I to say that I would meet you here to-morrow evening, I might be prevented, and you would think me unkind. But you will know that I am thinking of you all the same, and if we meet it will be an unexpected pleasure for us both, eh?’

He spoke kindly, but Nell, with the unerring instinct which love gives to women, read between the lines, and saw, that whatever he might say, Lord Ilfra-

combe would rather *not* meet her again in Usk.

‘Yes, you are right,’ she answered slowly. ‘But, oh, it is so hard to see you once, and, perhaps, not again for ages—like a drop of water to a man who is dying of thirst. Oh, Vernie, I must go. This has been heaven to me, but so much too short. Good-bye. God bless you. I will pray every moment that we may meet again.’

She heaved a deep sigh as she pronounced her farewell, and flitted down the grassy slope in the gloaming on her way to the farm again. And someone saw her—Hugh Owen, who had been lingering about the road in hopes of catching a glimpse of Nell, had watched more than half her interview with Lord Ilfracombe. He could not distinguish their words; he was too far off; but he had seen the two figures engaged in earnest conversation—he had seen them approach each other, and guessed the close embrace that followed—and he had seen their parting, and that

Lord Ilfracombe watched the tall, graceful shape of his companion till she was out of sight; until, in fact, Nell had entered Pantycuckoo Farm, and left the young minister in no doubt of her identity.

And what were Ilfracombe's feelings as he strolled back to Usk Hall? Not entirely pleasurable ones, we may be sure. He could not but be thankful that his worst fears for Nell Llewellyn were allayed, that his conscience was no longer burdened with the thought that his desertion had been the means of her death—but as he became used to this relief, the old sensations regarding her returned, and he could not help acknowledging to himself that her love wearied him—that Nora's sharpness of temper and standoffishness were as *sauce piquante* after Nell's adoration—and that, though he rejoiced to see her alive, he was very sorry they should have met in such close proximity to the house which held his wife. He had had one or two doubts lately as to whether another week of Usk Hall would not suit him very well

—now he had none. The sooner they were out of it, the better, and he should speak to Nora to-night about joining his mother's party at Wiesbaden. She and Nell must not meet again. He should not reveal the identity of the latter to Lady Ilfracombe, but all intercourse must be stopped between them. He was sorry for poor Nell—very, very sorry; but, hang it all, Nora was his wife, and the prospective mother of his children, and at all hazards he would keep her for the future out of the other woman's way.

This is the difference men make between their mistresses and their wives. The one may be the infinitely better woman of the two, but the law does not overshadow her, so she must stand like Hagar apart in the wilderness which she has created for herself.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Lord Ilfracombe walked into the lighted drawing-room of Usk Hall he looked so pale and thoughtful that the ladies began to rally him at once on his supposed melancholy. Dear me, what could it be? Who could he have met during his evening ramble to make him look so grave? Had she failed to keep her appointment, or had she been unkind? The whole list of little pleasantries with which the fair sex assail men on such occasions, with the idea of being arch and witty, was recounted for his lordship's benefit; but he looked very disinclined to supply food for their banter. His worry was so pre-evident that his wife asked him if he had a headache.

‘A little; nothing to speak of,’ he answered quietly.

‘Come along, old man, and have a game at pool,’ said Jack Portland, in his turn; ‘that will soon chase the vapours away. I expect it’s Sir Archibald’s port that’s done the job. It’s the most alluring wine I’ve tasted for many a day.’

‘No, no. I won’t allow it. Nothing of the kind,’ cried the jolly baronet; ‘there isn’t a headache in a dozen of it. Lord Ilfracombe hasn’t had enough of it. That’s what’s the matter with him.’

‘I think the sun may have touched me,’ said Ilfracombe feebly; ‘it has been very hot to-day.’

‘The sun; nonsense!’ exclaimed Mr Portland. ‘I never heard you give that excuse before, though we’ve been in several hot countries together. Come along to the billiard-room. You shouldn’t go wandering away by yourself in this fashion, and thinking over your sins. It’s enough to give any man the blues. I couldn’t stand it myself. You’ll forget it before the first game’s over.’

‘No, thanks, Jack, not to-night. I don’t

feel fit to compete with your excellent play. I'll sit here instead and listen to Nora's singing.'

And he threw himself on a sofa by his wife's side as he spoke.

'Ulysses at the feet of Penelope!' sneered Mr Portland. 'Well, Ilfracombe, long as I've known you, I never saw you turned into a carpet knight before.'

'Only for this evening,' said the earl lazily, as he settled himself comfortably on the sofa.

Jack Portland appeared quite aggrieved by his defalcation.

'Well, come along Sir Archibald and Lumley and the rest of you fellows. Don't let us waste our time looking at his lordship doing the lardi-dardi. He owes me my revenge for the "fiver" he made me disgorge last night; but I suppose it's no use trying to get it out of him now.' And, with a rude laugh, he left the room.

Ilfracombe lent back against the shoulder of his wife, and said,—

‘Sing something, darling, won’t you? Something low and sweet, like “Come to me.” My head is really painful, and I want soothing to-night.’

‘I will sing anything you like,’ replied Nora, as she rose and went to the piano.

Her voice was not powerful, but she had received a first-rate musical education in Malta, and was an accomplished drawing-room singer. She ran through about half a dozen songs, one after the other, accompanying herself with a delicacy of touch and artistic expression which was more than half the battle. Ilfracombe listened to her with a dreamy pleasure, but all the time he was cogitating which would be the best plea on which to induce Nora to leave Usk Hall. He was determined not to run the risk of her meeting Nell Llewellyn again; but she was rather a wilful little lady, and wanted to know the why and the wherefore of everything. She had asked him not to go to Wales, and he had insisted on doing so — she had begged they should not exceed the week

for which they had accepted the invitation, and he had told her but the day before that he wished to remain as long as Jack did. Now, he had to invent some excuse for leaving directly — what should it be? He was not a bright man; had he been so he would have known by this time that with Nora honesty was decidedly the best policy, because she was not easily deceived; and had he told her the truth, she would have been the first to wish to go. But he had a poor idea of women. He fancied that if his wife heard of the proximity of his former mistress there would be a 'row' — that Nora would not be able to resist flaunting her triumph in the other woman's face, nor Nell of telling his wife how far he had forgotten his duty to her in the pleasure and relief of finding that she (Nell) lived. Ilfracombe was a chivalrous gentleman; but it was not in his nature to love as either of these two women (whom he so much distrusted) loved him. But he managed to lay down a plan of action, as he lounged on the sofa listening to his

wife's singing, and as soon as they were alone he opened fire.

'Nora,' he said abruptly, 'I've made up my mind to leave the Hall. How soon can you be ready?'

As he had anticipated, Lady Ilfracombe required to know the reasons which had induced him to alter his plans.

'Do you mean to go at once?' she questioned. 'Why, it was only yesterday that you promised Lady Bowmant to stay until Mr Portland left. Has he altered his plans also, or do you intend to leave without him?'

'What difference can that make to you?' he said fretfully. 'I have always thought that you rather disliked Jack than otherwise.'

'My likes or dislikes have nothing to do with the matter, Ilfracombe, or we should not be here at all,' she answered. 'All I want to know is, *why* we are going so suddenly, and what I am to say to our hostess.'

'Say, why, anything. Surely you are

clever enough to invent an excuse without my assistance? Pretend to have received a letter from my mother, who desires us to join her without delay, or get a relation to die for the express purpose. Nothing can be easier to a clever girl like you.'

'Oh, I can tell as many lies as you wish, Ilfracombe; and as for going I shall only be too delighted to get away. Only it is not treating me fairly to keep me so completely in the dark. Something must have happened to make you so anxious to be off. Now, do tell me,' she continued, as she seated herself upon his knee, 'you know I'm as safe as a church. Have you a row on with Portland or any of the others? Or are Lady Bowmant's attentions becoming altogether too warm? I gave her free leave to make love to you, so you mustn't judge her too hardly.'

'No, my dear, don't be ridiculous; it's nothing of that sort. But—well, to make a clean breast of it, Nora, the play is awfully hot here; enough to break the Bank of England, and I think it's gone on quite

long enough. Why, I should be almost afraid to tell you how much money I have lost since coming here. We have an ample fortune; but, as you have often told me, no fortune will bear such a continual strain on it for long. And it's impossible to refuse playing with one's host. So I have decided that the sooner we are out of it the better.'

'You are right,' said his wife, thoughtfully. 'I was afraid of this all along. It sounds dreadfully vulgar, I know, but Usk Hall is in reality no better than a private hell. But what will your *fidus Achates*, Mr Portland, say to our going so suddenly?'

'Let him say what he likes,' replied the earl quickly. 'I can't be always answerable to him for my actions. We'll go straight from here to Wiesbaden and join my mother. No one can reasonably find fault with that.'

'No one has a right to find fault with anything you may do,' said Nora, though her curiosity was aroused by hearing her

husband speak so curtly of the opinion of his closest friend; 'and I'm with you, Ilfracombe, for one. When do you think we *can* start? The day after to-morrow? That will be Thursday.'

'Couldn't we manage it to-morrow morning?' asked the earl anxiously. 'You received some letters by this afternoon's post. Say you didn't open them till bedtime, and then found one from my mother, begging us to join her at once as she is ill. Make Denham pack your trunks to-night, and send word of your intentions to Lady Bowmant the first thing in the morning. Can't you manage it?'

'Oh, Ilfracombe, what an arch deceiver and plotter you would make,' cried the countess, laughing; 'but, really and truly, I don't think we can be off quite so soon as that. I'm not sure we should get a train to London to suit us. Besides, unless the dowager were dying, such extreme haste would look very suspicious.'

'Well, let her die then. You know

what I mean. Say the old lady is *in extremis*, and we can easily revive her as soon as we get over to Wiesbaden.'

'But what is the necessity for such extraordinary haste?' demanded Nora. 'It cannot only be because you have lost money over this visit. Surely the delay of a day or two cannot make much difference in comparison with running the risk of offending people who have honestly wished to give us pleasure? You know what my opinion has been all along, Ilfracombe, that Mr Portland leads you into a great deal of folly, and I shall be but too thankful if this is the end of it; still we owe something to the hospitality of the Bowmants; and now we *are* here, I cannot see what harm a day or two more can do us.'

The earl saw that he was worsted in the argument, so he contented himself with begging his wife to make arrangements to leave Usk as soon as she could, determining inwardly not to lose sight of her if possible till she had done so.

The announcement next morning of their intended departure gave general dissatisfaction. The Bowmants declared they had not seen half the beauties of the surrounding country, and that they had just made arrangements for a picnic party, and a dance, and a lot of other gaieties. Nora expressed her sorrow at the necessity of cutting their visit short; but the earl said little, and gave one the impression that the sudden determination had not originated with himself. Jack Portland, for one, took it so, and seized the first opportunity he could to speak to Nora on the subject.

‘Well, my lady,’ he commenced, ‘and so this is *your* doing, is it?—your little plan for dragging Ilfracombe from the jaws of the sharks.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ said Lady Ilfracombe.

‘Oh, yes, you do. This sudden idea of leaving the Hall emanated from your fertile brain alone. Ilfracombe had no idea of it yesterday. He told me he

was enjoying himself up to date, and should remain here as long as I did. But you got hold of him last night and forced the poor fellow to follow your lead. I see through it all as plain as a pikestaff.'

'Then you are utterly mistaken, Mr Portland. I had nothing to do with it. My husband told me yesterday that he wished to go, and it was with some difficulty that I persuaded him not to leave this morning. But that would have seemed so rude to the Bowmants.'

'But what is at the bottom of it?'

'You heard me tell Lady Bowmant that we have received a letter from Wiesbaden, to say that—'

'Oh, stop that rot, do!' exclaimed Mr Portland elegantly. 'We can put all that in our eyes and see none the worse for it. It's the *real* reason I want to know.'

'I have no other to give you.'

'Now, look here, Nora,' said Jack Portland, turning round short to confront her, 'I told you very plainly, when we talked

business over at Thistlemere, that I would not brook your interference between Ilfracombe and myself. You have not taken my caution, and must be prepared for the consequences. I daresay you have not forgotten them.'

'Of course not,' replied Nora coolly, though her heart beat rapidly with apprehension; 'but in this instance you blame me unfairly. I give you my word of honour—I swear before heaven, if that will please you better—that I have had nothing to do with this change in our plans; indeed, I argued against it. It was entirely my husband's proposition, and if you want any other reason but the one I have given you, you must seek it from himself.'

'Very well, we will drop that branch of the argument. But if you did not originate it, you must prevent it. If you choose to do it, it is in your power, and if you do not choose to do it—well.'

He finished off with a shrug of his broad shoulders, the interpretation of

which she knew to be, 'take the consequences.'

'You mean that you will produce those letters?' she said quickly.

'I do.'

'And if I consent to use my influence to induce Ilfracombe to remain here, what is to be my reward?'

Mr Portland did not immediately answer, and his silence roused her fears. Nora had often questioned herself which would be the best means by which to regain possession of her letters. She had tried force and argument and entreaty, and all three had failed. This cruel wretch kept her under his thumb by the mere retention of that little packet. She was a woman of courage and determination, and by hook or by crook she meant to have it. Had she lived in a more barbarous time, she would have slunk after him as he went to his nightly rest, and stabbed him, without any compunction, in the back, and been pleased to watch his death struggles, and to hiss into his ear at the last that she was

revenged. But, however much we may occasionally long to take the law into our own hands, the nineteenth century holds certain obstacles against it. Nora was a woman, also, of *finesse* and intrigue. She had several times argued whether, in lieu of other ways, she could bring herself to profess a lurking affection for Jack Portland that should bring him once more to her feet, as in the olden days, and make him give for a fancied love what force had no power to wrest from him. This idea flashed into her mind again as she waited for his reply, and felt she would sacrifice everything except her honour to bend him to her will.

‘What is to be my reward?’ she repeated, ‘if I do as you ask? Will you give me the packet?’

Unwittingly he played into her hands.

‘What is to be *my* reward if I do?’ he asked.

In a moment Nora had made up her mind. If the great stake at issue, a stake the winning of which meant to

secure the happiness of her whole life, was to be won by *finesse*, she would put forth all the *finesse* in her power to gain it, never mind what the consequences might be. So she looked at him coquettishly and said, like the arch actress he had once called her,—

‘What reward do you want, Jack, besides the condition you have already named?’

‘Come, that’s better,’ said Mr Portland. ‘I haven’t seen a smile like that on your ladyship’s face for many a day. What I want is, a little more affectionate interest from you, Nora, a little more cordiality to your husband’s best friend, a little more familiarity with him before other people, that they may see he is *enfant gâté du maison*! I am sure you understand me. Also, that you can comply with my wishes if you chose. Be more like what you were in Malta, and I shall feel my reward is equal to my sacrifice.’

‘And the sacrifice, Jack?’ she continued,

‘that is to be delivering up the letters you hold of mine.’

‘Certainly, if you care to have them. Now, Nora, I will make a bargain with you,—you shall have your letters as soon as ever you consent to fetch them with your own fair hands.’

‘To *fetch* them?’ she echoed wonderingly.

‘To fetch them. Did I not speak plainly? They are over at Panty-cuckoo Farm with my other things. If you will come to my room this evening, I will engage to deliver your letters to you myself.’

He thought she would have repudiated the proposal as a fresh insult, but, to his surprise, she answered firmly,—

‘I *will* come, if these are your only conditions, Jack, I agree to them. It is a *risqué* thing to do, but I will do it. I trust to your honour too implicitly to be afraid of your permitting any scandal to accrue from the act. And if you fulfil your promise, Ilfracombe shall stay

on at Usk Hall as long as you do. Is the bargain sealed?’

‘It is,’ replied Mr Portland, with the utmost surprise.

He had not entertained the faintest idea that Nora would agree to visit him at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Was it possible she still retained an inkling of affection for him, and had her constrained manner since her marriage been a blind for her real feelings? Men are so conceited where the *beau sexe* is concerned, that Jack Portland, bloated and disfigured as he was by excess and dissipation, was yet quite ready to believe that the Countess of Ilfracombe had been unable to resist the feelings raised in her breast by meeting him again. He had made the proposal that she should fetch her letters herself, because he thought she would guess from that, that he had no intention of giving them up to her; but when she consented to do so, he determined to make her secret visit to him one more terror by which to force her to influence her husband as

he should direct. Now, he hardly knew what he should do. She was coming, that was the extraordinary part of it. Without any pressing or entreaty, the Countess of Ilfracombe was actually coming over to his room at night, to secure her packet of letters. Well, it was the very 'rummiest go' he had ever heard of in his life before.

'You must be very careful that you are not seen to leave the Hall,' he said to her.

Now that she had agreed to come, he began to wish he had never said anything about it. What if his dear friend Ilfracombe got wind of the matter? Would not that render his wife's efforts on Mr Portland's behalf futile ever afterwards? The earl was very suave and easily led; but Jack Portland knew him too well to suppose he would ever forgive an offence against his honour. If Nora's good name were compromised by his nearest and dearest friend, that friend would have to go, if the parting broke his heart. Added

to which Mr Portland had no idea of getting into even an imaginary scrape for Lady Ilfracombe; he did not like her well enough. He regarded her only as a convenient tool in his hands which he had no intention of letting go.

‘Perhaps, after all,’ he said cautiously, ‘you had better not risk it. It *would* be a risk, you know, and it would be awkward to have to give Ilfracombe an explanation of the affair, wouldn’t it?’

‘I shall be careful to run no risk,’ was her reply.

‘But suppose some of the farm people should see you, what excuse could you make for being there?’

‘I should make no excuse at all. I have as much right as other people, I suppose, to take a moonlight ramble. What time shall I meet you? It must not be too late, as I must go upstairs when the other ladies do.’

‘That is not very early, as a rule,’ said her companion; ‘let us say mid-

night. Ilfracombe will be safe in the card or billiard-room at that time, and not likely to notice what you are about.'

'And how will you manage to leave the party without observation?'

'Oh, I shall trust to chance; but you may be sure I shall be there. And—and—if you fail me, Nora, why, I shall understand that you value your reputation more than you do—me, or your husband's good opinion, because in that case—'

'I understand. You need not recapitulate. But I shall not fail you. It will seem quite like old times having an assignation with you, Jack. Do you remember the night I met you down by the landing-place at Valetta, and that horrid man Pietro followed me all the way, and only showed his ugly face just as I had reached your side? I always believed that it was Pietro who betrayed us to papa, for he was sometimes very impertinent in his manner to me afterwards. Oh, and have you for-

gotten the time when you took me out in a boat and we got caught in a squall, and had to put in to shore, and remained nearly the whole day away in a little *estaminet*? What a fearful row papa made about it, and I had to pretend I had been alone, though I don't think he believed me. Papa certainly did hate you, Jack, though I never could understand why. I suppose it was all the money, or, rather, the lack of it.'

And here Nora heaved a most deceitful sigh.

'Do you ever regret that there was any obstacle between us?' asked Mr Portland persuasively. 'Do you think you could have been happy as Mrs Jack Portland, if Ilfracombe had not come between us?'

'Why, of course, I told you at the time I should,' said Nora.

'Ah, well, perhaps things are better as they are,' replied her companion; 'for I don't think you were ever cut out for a poor man's wife; you are too pretty and dainty and refined, my lady, for that.'

And if you had been miserable, I should have been so also. And so you really like me well enough still to meet me at the farm this evening, and fetch your dear little letters. I shall be so glad to have you for a few moments to myself. It will seem quite like the dear old times. Here, I can never say half a dozen words to you without as many old cats prying into our faces. Well, *au revoir*, my dear, be punctual, as our time will be limited—twelve o'clock to-night. I had better not stand talking to you any longer now.'

'I will be there,' answered the countess mechanically, as she turned round and walked another way.

CHAPTER IV.

HUGH OWEN was in a burning rage. From the high road he had witnessed Nell's meeting with the Earl of Ilfracombe, and he put the worst construction upon what he saw. Because this young man was a minister, it must not be supposed that he was naturally amiable and good. On the contrary, he possessed a very high temper, and at times an ungovernable one, and it was raging now. He had perceived a marked difference in Nell lately. She was not the same girl who had confessed her grievous fault to him in Panty-cuckoo Farm, nor promised so sweetly to follow his fortunes to South Africa in the Long Meadow subsequently. For a little while after the latter event, she had been very subdued and gentle with him, as though

she were contemplating the serious step to which she had conditionally pledged herself; but since the folks had returned to Usk Hall, she had declined either to walk with him or talk with him. Her old feverish, excitable manner had seemed to return, though Hugh had not liked to connect it with the fact of the Hall being occupied until the fatal moment when he was passing by Sir Archibald's field and witnessed Nell and the earl in close conversation. Who could she be talking with? What could she have to say to him? Why were their faces so close together? These were the questions that haunted poor Hugh for hours afterwards, and to which he could find no satisfactory solution. He could not trust himself to confront Nell as she went back to the farm—he was afraid of what he might say to her—so he resolved to sleep over it, if the restless, miserable, disturbed slumbers which followed his discovery could be called sleep. But on the next day he felt he must know the

reason of what he had seen. The remembrance of it came between him and his duties. He would not be able to preach and pray with an earnest and single heart until it had been relieved of the awful doubt that assailed it. So, the day after, he set forth for the farm, and found Nell, for a wonder, alone and free to receive him. The fact is, she did not dare go out, as she had been used to do lately, for fear of encountering Lord Ilfracombe in the company of his wife or friends. She felt as if she could not bear the sight—as if she should proclaim her right to him before all the world. And that would make him angry—he, who loved her still above all other things; for so had she interpreted his words of the night before. She had been in a state of beatification ever since, and her mother knew no more what to make of her present mood than she had done of her previous one. It would be difficult to say what Nell expected or believed would come

of the interview which had made her so happy. Apparently she had given herself no time to think. She knew perfectly well that her intimacy with Ilfracombe was over and done with, and that thenceforward she could have no part nor lot in him or his affairs. She knew she should never enter his house again, nor associate with his acquaintances, nor enjoy any of his good things. Yet she felt supremely happy. To understand her feelings, one must not only be a woman—one must be a woman who has loved and lost, and found that whatever the loss, the love remained as it was. Women have greater faith than men, as a rule, in the unseen and the compensation of an after life. They think more of the heart than of the body of the creature they love, and give them the hope of a reunion in another world—of retaining the eternal affections of the man they care for; and they will try and content themselves with the thought of the future. Far better that,

they say, than his companionship on earth, whilst his heart is the property of some other woman. The earl had managed to deceive Nell so well without intending to deceive her, that she was already disposed to pity Lady Ilfracombe, who could only lay claim to his worldly goods. As she had told him, 'Say you love me best of all the world, and the other woman can have your title and your money.' She had sat indoors all day dreaming over the unexpected happiness that had come to her — recalling in fancy every word he had uttered, every look he had given, every kiss he had pressed upon her happy mouth. The wretched interval that lay between them had vanished like a dream. She had forgotten the abject misery with which she had received the news of his marriage, the despairing attempt at suicide that followed it, her return home, and the apathetic existence she had led since — all had disappeared under the magic touch of

love. She was no longer Nell o' Pantycuckoo Farm, as the neighbourhood called her; she was Lord Ilfracombe's housekeeper, the woman he had chosen to be the mistress of his home. She was his love, his lady, his daily companion. She looked with a kind of pathetic curiosity at the print dress she wore, at the simple arrangement of her chesnut hair, at her ringless fingers and wrists unadorned by bangles. They had all gone—the silks and satins, the golden combs and hairpins, the jewels and laces; but *he* remained, the pride and jewel of her life. 'Vernie' loved her.

It was so wonderful, so delightful, so unexpected, that her head swam when she thought of it. She was just considering whether she might not venture to stroll up the long fields again that evening — whether 'Vernie' might not come out as he had done the evening before in hopes of meeting her, when Hugh Owen raised the latch of the farmhouse door and walked unceremoni-

ously in. His entrance annoyed Nell. It disturbed her beautiful reverie, put to flight all her golden dreams, and made her fear lest his visit might be prolonged so as to interfere with her plans. The welcome he received, therefore, was not, to say the least of it, cordial.

‘Neither father nor mother are at home, Hugh,’ she said, as she caught sight of him, ‘and I’m just going out. You’ve come at an unlucky moment.’

‘So I always seem to come now,’ he answered; ‘but I have a word or two to you, Nell, that can’t be put off; so I must ask you to listen to me for a few minutes first.’

‘They must be very few, then, for I’ve got work of my own to do,’ she replied.

‘It’s the work you do that I’ve come to speak to you about,’ said the young man, ‘and I claim the right to do so. I was sauntering up and down the road last night, Nell, in the hope of catching sight of you, when I saw you cross the meadow over there and meet a man and

talk to him for better than half an hour. Who was he?’

Nell flared up in her impetuous manner at once.

‘And what business is that of yours?’ she exclaimed.

‘Why, every business in the world! Whose should it be but mine? Haven’t you promised to be my wife?’

‘No!’ cried the girl boldly.

‘No? What! not in the Long Meadow behind father’s house?’ he returned in astonishment.

‘I said if my people ever emigrated—which they never will do—that I would go with them as your wife; but that was only a conditional promise, and I’ve altered my mind since then. I shall never be anybody’s wife now.’

‘If I saw rightly last night, Nell, perhaps it will be as well. Who was the gentleman you met and talked with for so long? What is he to you? Where have you met him before? What had you to say to him?’

‘Which of your questions will you have answered first?’ asked Nell. ‘And what is it to you who I choose to talk to? Are you my master, or am I a child to be catechised after this fashion? I shall see and speak to whom I like, and I refuse to say anything more about it.’

‘Nell,’ said Hugh in a sorrowful voice, ‘when you told me your history I was truly sorry for you. I thought what a terrible thing it was that such a respectable girl should lower herself to the level of the lowest of her sex; but I believed it was a misfortune—a step into which you had been led with your eyes shut—and that you regarded it with horror and loathing. I must have thought so, you know, or I should never have proposed to make you my wife.’

‘Well, and what is all this tirade leading to?’ said Nell.

She felt sorry for Hugh, but not a bit ashamed of herself, and the impossibility of explaining the matter to him made her irritable and pert.

‘To a very sorrowful conclusion, Nell. I have seen, ever since this party of gentlemen and ladies came to the Hall, that you are altered. You have become restless and uneasy; you have refused to walk out with me any more; and you have avoided my company. I can only put two and two together, and draw my conclusions from that. I have often heard it said that if once a woman is led astray to lead what people call a “gay life,” she is never contented with a quiet, domestic existence again, but I was loath to believe it of you, who seemed so truly sorry for the past and all the shame and disgrace it had brought you. But what am I to think now? I see you with my own eyes meet a man who looked to me in the gloaming like a gentleman, and talk familiarly with him, and yet you won’t tell me his name, nor what your business was with him.’

‘No, I won’t,’ she replied determinedly, ‘because it is no concern of yours.’

‘But I say it *is* my concern, and the concern of everybody that has an interest

in you, Nell. Where there is deceit there must be wrong. Do your father and mother know this gentleman, and of your meeting him? Did you tell them?’

‘I did not, and I shall not. It is my private affair, and I shall keep it entirely to myself.’

The young man rose indignantly.

‘Then I’ll tell you now what I didn’t like to mention before, and that is that I saw him kiss you. I am sure of it from the closeness with which he held you. Oh, for shame, Nell, for shame!’

‘And what if he did?’ cried Nell, with crimson cheeks; ‘that also is my business and not yours.’

‘Your business, yes, and you may keep it so!’ exclaimed Hugh Owen hotly, as his eyes blazed with anger. ‘I see you now, Nell Llewellyn, in your true colours, and would to God I had known you from the first. Your penitence was all assumed, put on to catch an unwary fool like myself, because there was no one better within reach. Your sorrow, too, for the loss of your lover

was another sham, easily consoled by the kisses of a stranger. You are not a true woman, Nell. You are unfit for the love or consideration of any honest man. You are an outcast and a wanton, and I will never willingly speak to you again.'

'I will take good care you don't,' cried Nell in her turn. 'I have more powerful friends than you think of—friends who will not see me insulted by a common farmer's son. I know I promised conditionally to be your wife, but I did it for your sake, not my own. I should have hated the life—the very thought is distasteful to me. So never think of me in that light or any light again. I break off with you from this moment. The man I met last night is worth ten thousand of you. I value his little finger more than your whole body. I would rather beg my bread with a gentleman than sit on a throne with a clod like you. Now you have the whole truth. Make what you like of it.'

'Oh, stop, stop. In mercy to yourself,

stop,' cried the young man, as with both hands clapped to his ears he ran out of the house.

Nell felt rather subdued when left to herself. She was not quite sure how far she had betrayed her secret, or if she had said anything in her wrath to lead to Lord Ilfracombe's identity. But on revision she thought not. Hugh did not know the name of her former lover—he had not heard those of the guests at the Hall. There was no chance of his gaining a knowledge of the truth. And, as for the rest, it was just as well he had seen for himself that they could never be more to each other than they were at present. And then she resolved into another of the pleasing day-dreams from which his entrance had disturbed her. Her father and mother came bustling in after a little while full of complaints and anxiety. One of their best cows had shown symptoms of dangerous illness, and every remedy that the farm could boast of was set in motion at once.

‘Come, my lass,’ cried Mrs Llewellyn, as she entered the parlour, ‘you must bestir yourself and help me. Father and I are in sad trouble. Bonnie is as bad as she can be, and if we can’t stop the symptoms she’ll be dead before the morning. Ay, but misfortunes never seem to come single, what with the raising of the rent and other troubles. I’ve set Betty to put on all the hot water she can, and we must choose the oldest blankets we have for fomentations. Bring the lamp with you, Nell, I want to find the proper medicines in father’s chest.’

The girl snatched up the light, and followed her mother to where Mr Llewellyn kept a chest full of veterinary drugs.

‘That ain’t it, and that ain’t it,’ the old woman kept on saying as she pulled bottle after bottle to the light. ‘Ah, I think this is the stuff that cured Daisy last year.’

She pulled out the cork with her teeth, and tasted a little of the brown, nauseous-

looking mixture, but spat it out immediately on the floor. 'God save us, that's the lotion for the sheep's backs, deadly poison. Don't you ever touch that, my girl. It'll take the skin off your tongue in no time.'

'Am I likely?' remonstrated Nell seriously; 'but suppose you had given it to the poor cow by mistake? Why don't you label it plainly "Poison," mother, and then there would be no fear of an accident?'

'Ay, my lass, that's a good thought. Don't put it back, Nell, but carry it to your bedroom and put it a-top of the wardrobe. It will be safe enough there, and when we're a bit less busy you shall write a label for it. It's arsenic, I believe. I know last year father gave a drop or two by mistake to one of the cats that was bad in its inside, and the poor beast was dead in a few minutes. *This* is the cows' mixture,' said Mrs Llewellyn, pulling out a second bottle from the recesses of the old trunk. 'Not dissimilar looking, are they? but, Lor', what a difference in their

effects. This is some of the finest stuff we ever had, made from a receipt of farmer Owen's. Take it down to father at once, Nell, for he's in a hurry for it, and I'll fetch the blanket. And don't forget to put the other a-top of your wardrobe,' she called out after her daughter.

The poor cow was very bad, and for some hours the whole household was occupied in providing remedies and applying them. When ten o'clock struck, and the animal was pronounced to be out of danger, Nell was regularly tired out, and hardly inclined to sit down to supper with her parents, but the farmer would not hear of her leaving them.

'Come on, lass,' he said; 'I've news for you, only this bothering cow put it clean out of my head. Grand news, Nelly. You'll never guess it, not if you tried for a twelvemonth.'

Nell returned to the table, white and scared looking.

'News about *me*, father?' she said.

'Well, not about you exactly, but that

concerns you all the same. Now, who do you suppose has come to the Hall, and is staying along of Sir Archibald?’

Then she knew he had heard of Lord Ilfracombe’s arrival, and set her teeth, lest she should betray herself.

‘How should I know, father?’ she said tremblingly. ‘I haven’t been near Mrs Hody for the last week. Is it the prince whom they expected?’

‘The prince, be d—d!’ exclaimed the farmer. ‘What’s the value of a foreign prince beside one of our own English noblemen? I wouldn’t give you *that* for the prince,’ snapping his fingers. ‘No; it is somebody much better and higher. It’s your old master, the Earl of Ilfracombe, and his lady. What do you think of that?’

‘The Earl of Ilfracombe!’ echoed Nell, in order to gain time. ‘But who told you, father?’

‘Jackson, the coachman, to be sure, who drove them both home from the

railway station, and who should know better than he? He says the earl is a fine-looking young man, as fair as daylight, and his lady is a nice, pretty creature too. I thought I should surprise you, Nell. You'll be wanting to go up to the Hall to see 'em both, now, won't you?'

'Oh, father, why should I go to see them? His lordship won't want to see me. Most likely he's forgotten my very name.'

'Well, Nell, I *am* surprised to hear you talk so!' exclaimed her mother. 'It don't look as if you knew much about the gentry, who are always glad to see servants as have behaved themselves whilst in their service. But perhaps you're afraid the earl is annoyed with you for leaving him so suddenly, and just as he was bringing home his bride. Is that it?'

'Perhaps so, mother,' said the girl, looking very much confused.

'Ah, I was always doubtful if there

wasn't something queer about your coming back so suddenly, and so I've told your mother,' remarked Mr Llewellyn dubiously. 'But if it was so, why, you must go over to the Hall to-morrow morning and ask his lordship's pardon; and perhaps mother, here, can find some little thing as you could take up as an offering for his lady. Can you, mother?'

'Oh, I daresay,' replied Mrs Llewellyn, 'she might fancy a pen of our Minorca fowls or Cochins. I suppose they've a fine farm down at Thistlemere, Nell?'

'Yes, I suppose so. But, mother, I cannot go and see them, or take Lady Ilfracombe any presents. It will seem like intrusion. They've not asked to see me, and I'm only a discharged servant, after all.'

'Rubbish! Nonsense! What are you talking about?' exclaimed the old farmer angrily. 'A discharged servant! Why, didn't you tell mother and me that you gave his lordship warning yourself?'

Haven't you told the truth about your leaving? Is there anything hid under it all as we know nothing about? Come, now, no more secrets, if you please; let us have the plain truth at once, or I will go up the first thing in the morning and see his lordship myself.'

'Lor', father, don't be so hard on the lass!' exclaimed his wife. 'You've turned her as white as a lily with your noise. What should be under it, except that the maid wanted to come home? And time enough, too, after being three years away. Don't you mind him, Nell, my girl. He's just put out and cranky about the cow. If you don't want to see his lordship, why, no more you shall. Here, sup up your beer and get to bed. I don't half like the way in which you flushes on and off. It's just how my sister's girl went off in a waste. You sha'n't be worried to do anything as you don't wish to, take my word for it.'

'That's how you fools of women go on

together, without a thought of the business, and how it's going to the devil,' grumbled her husband. 'Here's Lord Ilfracombe come here, as you may say, in the very nick o' time, and Nell the very one to ask a favour of him, and you cram her head with a pack o' nonsense about not going near him. Sir Archibald is going to raise the rent, and send us all to the workhouse, when a word from his lordship might turn his mind the other way, especially if Nell put it to him, on account of her long service and good character, and you tell her not to do it. Bah! I've no patience with you.'

'Oh, that's a different thing,' quoth the old woman. 'If Nell can get Lord Ilfracombe to plead with Sir Archibald on our account, why, of course, she'll do it, for her own sake as well as for ours; won't you, my lass?'

'Plead with Lord Ilfracombe!' cried Nell hysterically. 'No, no, indeed, I cannot. What has he to do with Sir Archibald's rents? He is only a guest

in the house. It would be too much to ask. It would place him in an unpleasant position. I would not presume to do such a thing.'

Both her parents rounded on her at once.

'Well, of all the ungrateful hussies as I ever saw,' said her father, 'you're the worst. You come home to see your poor parents toiling and moiling to keep a roof above their heads, and nigh breaking their hearts over the raising of the rent and the idea of having to leave the old homestead, and you refuse even to speak a word to save them from starvation.'

'Well, I never did!' cried her mother. 'Here you've been home for nearly a year, and no more use than a baby, what with your London training and your illness, and your fid-fads and the first thing as your poor father asks you to do for him you downright refuse. I didn't think it of you, Nell, and I begin to fear, like father, that there must be

something under it all as you're afraid to let us know.'

'But I shall know it for all that,' said the farmer; 'for I'll see this fine lord with the break of day, and ask him downright under what circumstances you left his service. If he's a gentleman, he'll answer the question, and give me some sort of satisfaction. I won't put up with this sort of treatment from you no longer, my lass, and so I give you plain notice.'

'Very well. Do as you like. It's all the same to me,' cried Nell, as she rose from the table and rushed from the room.

Her sleeping apartment was over the lodgers' rooms, and as she reached it she locked the door and flung herself on the bed, face downwards, in an agony of apprehension. What was going to happen next? she asked herself. What was to be the next scene in her life's tragedy? Would her irate father force the truth from the earl, or would he guess it from his embarrassment? Would the story come

to the ears of the countess, and make mischief between her husband and herself? There seemed to be no end to the horrors that might happen from her father having gained knowledge of the proximity of her former employer. And if he confided his doubts to Hugh Owen, or any of the Dale Farm party, might not he add his quota to the chapter of horrors by relating what he had witnessed in the field the night before?

Poor Nell could get no rest that night for thinking of these things, and wondering how she should come out of them all.

She rose after a while and bathed her burning and swollen eyelids in cold water, and took a seat by the open casement and out-gazed into the calm, peaceful night. The air was warm and balmy, but there were few stars, and the moon was in her first quarter.

How long she had sat there she did not know, till she heard the church clock chiming the hour of twelve, and thought

to herself that it was time she lay down on her bed. But just as she was about to do so, her attention was arrested by the figure of a woman walking slowly and furtively over the grass beneath the window.

Nell did not know who she was, nor what she came for; but not unnaturally supposing that she would not be there at that time of night unless she needed the assistance of her mother or herself in some sudden emergency, she waited quietly until the stranger should knock or call out in order to summons her. To her surprise, however, the woman did not go round to the principal entrance to the farmhouse, but lingered about the grass-plat, walking backwards and forwards, and occasionally glancing over her shoulder in the direction of the Hall.

Nell's curiosity was now fully aroused, but she made no sign to arrest the attention of the visitor. On the contrary, she drew further back from the window, so as to be entirely concealed by the dimity

curtain that shaded it. From this vantage-ground she presently saw the woman joined by a man, who she at once recognised as Mr Portland. Nell's first feeling was indignation that he should presume to make her mother's house a place of assignation ; but when he commenced to talk, she could only listen, spellbound.

CHAPTER V.

‘AND so you have kept your word, my lady,’ he said nonchalantly.

‘Had you any doubt that I should do so?’ she answered.

‘It would not have been the first time if you had broken it,’ was the sarcastic rejoinder.

‘Now, look here Jack,’ said the woman, ‘you have not brought me here at this time of night to upbraid me for the inevitable past, surely? You must know that I run a fearful risk in coming here. You must know also that only one object on earth would have brought me. Be merciful as you are great, and don’t keep me fooling my time away in order to listen to your platitudes. Isn’t the subject of our former relations with each other rather stale?’

‘It will never be stale to me, Nora,’

replied Mr Portland; 'and the melancholy fact that you preferred Ilfracombe to myself is not likely to make me forget it.'

'*Ilfracombe!*' thought Nell, from her post of observation, 'can this really be the countess? Oh, how grossly she must be deceiving him. Prefer Ilfracombe to him! Why, of course it *must* be she. I will hear every word they say now, if I die for it.'

'That is nonsense,' resumed Nora, 'you never really cared for me, Jack; and if you did, the sentiment has died long ago. Don't let us twaddle, pray, but come to business.'

'I thought the twaddle (as you call it) was part of our business, but I am willing to let it drop. What has your ladyship to say next?'

'I want to ask you something which I have been afraid to mention with so many eavesdroppers as we have round us at the Hall. You knew that *chère amie* of Ilfracombe's — Miss Llewellyn — of course.'

‘I did. Everyone who knew him knew her. What of it? Are you getting up a little jealousy of the dead for future use?’

‘Don’t talk nonsense. Am I the sort of woman to go raving mad on account of my husband’s former peccadilloes? But what became of her?’

At this juncture Nell became keenly attentive. She thrust her head as far as she dared out of the window, and did not lose a single word.

‘By Jove! no,’ laughed Portland, ‘I cannot imagine your ladyship being jealous of anything, or anyone who had not the power to take your beloved coronet from you. But surely you know what became of the poor girl? She is dead. She drowned herself when Ilfracombe sent home word that he was about to marry you, and told old Sterndale to give her “the genteel kick out.”’

‘Poor child,’ said the countess, compassionately, ‘it was very terrible, if true. But what proofs were there of her doing so? Was the body ever found?’

‘I believe not. But don’t talk of it, please. I had a sincere regard for Miss Llewellyn, and the thought of her dreadful end makes me sad.’

‘*You* feeling for anyone of your fellow-creatures, Jack?’ replied Nora incredulously. ‘You must have been very hard hit. But I really want to know if there was any doubt of her death. I have a particular reason for asking.’

‘I heard there was no doubt. That is all I can tell you, Lady Ilfracombe.’

‘What was she like, Jack?’ urged Nora.

‘Very handsome indeed, more than handsome, beautiful; with the most glorious golden chesnut hair imaginable, and large hazel eyes, with dark brows and lashes, and a straight nose and good mouth and chin. A lovely figure, too, tall and graceful, though with large hands and feet. A remarkable-looking young woman, Nora, and it is a feather in your cap to have driven her memory so completely from Ilfracombe’s heart.’

‘But I am not sure that I *have* driven it. Ilfracombe is very touchy on the subject now, and cannot bear her name to be mentioned. But I tell you what, Jack, she is no more dead than I am, for I have seen her.’

‘My God! Where?’ exclaimed Mr Portland excitedly.

‘Why, in this very house. Don’t you remember Sir Archibald telling us that the young woman who stopped Lady Bowmant’s cobs must have been one of the Llewellyns? I came over here the same afternoon to see her and thank her more particularly than I had been able to do, and if the girl I saw is not Nell Llewellyn, I’ll eat my hat. She answers to your description exactly.’

‘You don’t mean to say so! It never entered into my calculations. I had made so sure that she was gone. Have you mentioned your suspicions to Ilfracombe?’

‘No fear. I’m not such a fool as I look. Why should I raise up all the old feelings in him, just as he is settling

down so nicely with me? But I should like to know it is true, and to know for certain. It is a dreadful thing to have a girl's death at one's door. So I thought I would tell you, and you could find out for me.'

'I will make a point of doing so, but I'm afraid you are labouring under a mistake. There was so little doubt of Miss Llewellyn's death. The young woman you have seen may be a sister, or other relation. It is worth while inquiring.'

'But don't compromise Ilfracombe in doing so. He particularly begged me not to mention his name when I called here, in case they might be of the same family. But I mustn't stay longer, Jack, so please let me have the letters.'

'All right. But you must come and fetch them.'

'Well, I am here, safe enough.'

'Perhaps, but the letters are not here. They are in my despatch-box in my room.'

'Go and bring them then.'

‘The bargain was that *you* were to fetch them, Nora.’

‘But not to enter your room, Jack. I cannot do that. It is impossible. I refuse.’

‘Then you can’t fetch the letters, my lady.’

‘And have you brought me here to play me such an unfair trick as that? You knew that I could not enter your room? It would be risking the happiness of my whole future life. Supposing Mr Lennox were to return suddenly, and find me closeted there with you? You want to ruin me. I shall do no such thing.’

‘You know now that you are only quibbling, Nora — only fighting with the inevitable. You will not rest till you have those letters in your own hands. You have told me you would give half your fortune to get them, and yet you refuse to pass the threshold of my room. What nonsense. You must devise some others means by which to procure them then, for I will not go back from my

word. I said you should have them if you would fetch them, and now that they are within your reach, you refuse to stretch out your hand and take them. Very well, it is not my fault. You must return without them.'

Nora thought a minute, and then said,—

'What time is it?'

'Half-past twelve,' replied her companion. 'They will not break up over there for another hour and a half.'

She knew she was as much within this man's power as if he held the proofs of some great crime which she had committed. She did not exactly remember what her foolish letters to him contained; but she was sure there was sufficient love-sick folly in them which, aided by his inuendoes, and even falsehoods, might bring everlasting disgrace upon her, to say nothing of Ilfracombe's serious displeasure which she dreaded still more. To lose her husband's trust and confidence and respect—perhaps his love—was too terrible a contingency in the young countess's eyes. She had

been guilty of a fearful social error in going to the farm at all; she knew that, but now she was there, would it not be better to comply with Jack Portland's conditions, hard as they might be, than to return to the Hall, having played her *escapade* for nothing.

'Where are the letters?' was the next question she asked him.

'I have told you. In my despatch-box.'

'But where is the box?'

'On a table just within the door.'

'Will you go in first and get them out, and then I will cross the threshold and take them from you.'

'Are you so terribly afraid of me as all that, Nora?'

'Not afraid of you or any man,' she answered haughtily, 'but afraid of compromising my good name. It is too fearful a risk. Anything might happen. Mr Lennox might return, or the people of the house come down, or—or— Oh, Jack, if you ever loved me the least little bit, don't ask me to do more than I have done.'

He appeared to be satisfied with her excuse, for Nell saw him leave her side and disappear into the house. In another minute the countess, who had stood looking anxiously after him, seemed to have received his signal, for she cautiously followed him. Then there was a silence of several minutes, during which Nell listened eagerly to hear what passed, but no sound reached her ear. The next thing she saw was the figure of Lady Ilfracombe, who left the house hurriedly, and, throwing herself down on the grass, burst into tears. It was a rare occurrence for Nora to lose command of herself, but to-night she felt utterly worsted and broken down. She had built so many fair hopes on this venture, and now she found herself as far from obtaining her wishes as ever.

‘You are *a brute!*’ she exclaimed, as Jack Portland joined her; ‘a false and merciless brute! You have lured me here under false pretences, and in order to get me only more surely in your toils. You knew you were deceiving me—you knew

the letters were not there — you persuaded me to enter your room against all my better judgment, in order that I may compromise myself, and be more your slave than before. But there must be an end put to it some day. I will not go on being laughed at by you for ever. I defy you to do your worst. Show Ilfracombe those letters, as you have so often threatened, and I will take good care the day you do so is the last you ever spend under any roof of mine.'

'Softly, softly, my lady,' said Portland; 'aren't you going a little too fast, and making a little too much noise over this business? I give you my word of honour that I fully believed that interesting packet of letters was in my despatch-box.'

'Your word of *honour*!' repeated Nora, disdainfully, as she rose from her despairing attitude and stood up, wiping her wet eyes; 'how long have you possessed the article?'

'Now, Nora, none of your sneers, if you please,' said Jack Portland; 'don't be fool-

ish, and make a regular quarrel of this matter. Let me tell you this—that so long as you insult me on every occasion I shall never give you back those letters. After all, they are legally mine, and you have no right to demand their restoration. If I return them, it will be as a favour; and people do not, as a rule, grant favours to ladies who call them liars and scoundrels and cheats for their pains. And now, had you not better go back to the Hall? I have shown you what I can do by bringing you here, and I don't mean to do anything more for you to-night. When you have learned how to coax and wheedle a little, instead of bully and storm, perhaps you may persuade me to give you back those much-longed-for letters.'

The countess seemed to be perfectly subdued. To those who knew her as she generally was, and especially to the man before her, the change in her voice and demeanour would have seemed a marvel.

'Yes, I will go,' she replied in a meek tone; 'but I should like to have a few

words with you first, Jack. I cannot think what has changed you so; but you are not the same man you were at Malta. Still, I do not think you can have quite forgotten that time when we first met, and thought we loved each other. It was my father, Sir Richard Abinger, who separated us, as you know well, and even if he had not done so, I do not think you would have wished to marry me, for you had no income, and I should only have been a great burden to you. So, is it quite fair, do you think, to visit the fact of our parting on my head, especially now that I am married to another man? Those letters of mine—written to you when I considered we were engaged lovers—I daresay they are very silly and spooney, and full of the nonsense people generally write under such circumstances; but I cannot think there is anything compromising in them, as you would lead me to believe. I feel sure, if I were to show them to my husband, he would forgive and absolve me from all thought of wrong. But will you not spare

me such an act of self-humiliation? Cannot you be man enough to forgive a girl who has never done you any harm for having caused you a little mortification? Will you not do so—for the sake of Malta and the time when you thought you loved me?’

Nora’s voice was so sorrowful, and yet so full of dignity, as she pronounced these words, that Nell’s heart burned within her to listen to them, and she longed to have the power to steal those letters and restore them to her, spite of all Mr Jack Portland’s machinations. And as she sat there she clenched her hands together and said to herself that if it were to be done she would do it. She had not been unmindful of Nora’s kindness when she visited her under the guise of Mrs Lumley, though she had so ill-requited it, and now that she knew who she was, and that it was Ilfracombe’s unloved wife who had had her ring and money flung back in her face, Nell’s generous nature asserted itself, and she inwardly vowed that if she could do her a good turn she would.

‘Why are you so very anxious to get these letters back, especially if there’s nothing in them?’ asked Mr Portland. ‘It’s not because you’re so deuced fond of Ilfracombe that you tremble for his peace of mind surely? You’ve got your coronet out of him, and what on earth do you want more? You are not going to stuff me up with any humbug about your having fallen in love with him, because I sha’n’t believe it if you do. You married him for a settlement—you never left him alone till you had hooked him—and now you’ve got the poor gull fast, what harm can that little packet of letters do him, or you, even if I should take it into my head some day to bring you to order by showing them to him, eh?’

Even in the dim light of the starless sky Nell could see the countess twisting her lace handkerchief nervously about in her hands as she answered her tormentor.

‘Yes, you are right. I married Ilfracombe because I thought it a fine thing to become a countess, and to be presented

at Court and have a large fortune and everything that I could require. But I don't feel like that now. I — I — love him.'

'*You love him!*' echoed Portland, with a coarse laugh; 'that's the best joke I ever heard in my life. Do you suppose he cares for you? Why, he only married you because his people were always after him to get rid of poor Miss Llewellyn, and settle down respectably.'

'Oh, no, no, don't say that!' cried the countess in a tone of unmistakable anguish.

'But I do say it, and I could bring forward dozens of fellows to corroborate my statement. Ilfracombe adored Nell Llewellyn — so did she him. Do you suppose she would have committed suicide else? Would *you* risk your precious life, or still more precious coronet, for any man on earth?'

'Yes, I could — for Ilfracombe,' she answered tremblingly.

'I can put all that in my eye and

see none the worse,' continued Portland; 'but, at any rate, your devotion is thrown away. His lordship cares more for Miss Llewellyn's memory than he does for your living self. You may represent his station in life to him — perhaps, his prospective family—but *she* was his love.'

'You are very cruel to me,' faltered Nora, 'though perhaps I have deserved your contempt and irony. But no one could live with Ilfracombe and not love him. He is so generous—so considerate—so unselfish, that a woman would be insensible to every good influence not to feel grateful to him in return. And as for poor Miss Llewellyn, you are mistaken if you imagine you have been the first to tell me of his esteem for her, and sorrow for her untimely loss. He has told me all about it himself, and I have sympathised deeply with him. My husband has no secrets from me, as I earnestly desire not to have any from him. Were it not for these unfortunate letters I should have none. But you

have tortured me too far, Jack. I throw up the sponge. I shall tell Ilfracombe on the first opportunity of the boasted hold you have over me, and beg him to end it one way or the other. Let him read the letters and do his worst. It can never be as bad as yours. You have made my married life a torment to me by your unmanly threats.'

She turned away from him as she concluded, and commenced to toil up the steep acclivity that led to the gate. But Jack Portland sprang after her.

'I am not going to let you go alone,' he said. 'Come, Nora, let us part better friends than this. Forgive me for being a little amused at the idea of you and old Ilfracombe having a quiet "spoon" together, and trust me that he shall never trace any annoyance that may accrue from your former little follies to my door.'

The countess did not appear to make any answer to this harangue, and Nell watched them ascend the hill to-

gether and pass out of the white gate.

‘And how long is Jack Portland to be trusted?’ she thought, as they disappeared. ‘Just as long as it suits him, and then he will hold his unmanly threats over that poor woman’s head again. Well, I’ve no particular reason to love her, heaven knows, but I can do her this kindness in return for hers, and I will, if only to keep *his* name unstained by the tongue of such a scoundrel as Jack Portland. They have gone to the Hall, and he will probably not be back for another hour. Now’s the time? If I wait till daylight mother will be about, and liable to break in upon me at any moment. I will slip down at once.’

She lighted a taper, and, shading it with her hand, crept softly down the stairs that led to the bricked passage, and so into the lodgers’ rooms. That occupied by Mr Portland lay to the left. The door was ajar. Nell had only to push it gently open in order to enter.

She set her light down on a table and glanced around her. All was in perfect order, except the much-talked-of dispatch-box, which had been left open with its contents tumbled over. Nell did not believe that the packet of letters was not there. It was very unlikely that Jack Portland would not know what was in his box, or what was not. He had intended to hand it to the countess, but changed his mind at the last moment. She looked carefully through the contents of the box, but found no packet. She had replaced the papers carefully, and was about to search the remainder of the apartment, when, to her horror, she heard a footstep enter the narrow passage that divided the two rooms and approach the one which she occupied. It was useless to extinguish her light. The newcomer had already perceived her.

‘Halloa!’ he exclaimed, ‘and what pretty burglar have I here?’

She turned to confront him, and his tone changed to one of terror.

‘My God, *Nell!*’ he cried, ‘are you dead or living?’

She stood face to face with Jack Portland.

CHAPTER VI

‘ARE you living,’ he repeated, ‘or—or—dead?’

In the excitement of his subsequent conversation with Lady Ilfracombe he had forgotten the suspicions she had communicated to him with regard to this woman, and now stood before her, dazed and trembling. Men who are given to drinking are always terribly afraid of the supernatural.

‘Don’t alarm yourself,’ replied Nell scornfully, ‘I am alive.’

‘*Alive!* Then Lady Ilfracombe was correct when she assured me she had met you. Though she had never seen you before, your description tallied so exactly with the girl she saw here that she felt certain you must be the same person.’

‘She was right,’ said Nell quietly.

‘And how did it all happen?’ asked Jack Portland eagerly. ‘You will forgive my curiosity, when you remember that your death was not only currently reported, but, as it was supposed, proved beyond a doubt. We—that is, Ilfracombe and all your friends—felt your loss very much. It was terrible for us to think you had come to so sad an end. You will believe so much, will you not?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘But you are standing, Miss Llewellyn; pray sit down. You will not be afraid to bestow a few moments on me in order to satisfy my great curiosity. Tell me first, how is it we find you here?’

‘That is easily accounted for, Mr Portland. Usk is my native place. I was born at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Mr and Mrs Llewellyn are my father and mother. So it was only natural, when I lost the home I thought was mine, that I should return to them.’

‘But how was it that the rumour of

your death became so widely circulated?’

‘Oh, don’t talk of that,’ she said wearily. ‘I *did* throw myself into the water. I thought it would be better for all concerned, myself especially; but some well-meaning people pulled me out again, and when I found that the world believed me to be gone, I thought it just as well not to undeceive it. That is all. Of course I had no idea you would ever come here, or meet me again. As it is, all I wish is that you should leave Usk without betraying my secret to my parents.’

‘You may depend on me, Miss Llewellyn,’ said Portland. ‘But does Ilfracombe know of your proximity?’

A gleam of pleasure lighted up her features.

‘Yes. I met him yesterday, quite by accident, and he was as surprised to see me as you are. But he was glad—very glad.’

(‘Hullo!’ thought Jack to himself;

‘then this accounts for his sudden determination to go?’)

But aloud he said,—

‘Of course he would be, as we all are. And now, may I ask what you were doing in my room, Miss Llewellyn?’

‘Yes,’ she answered boldly. ‘I came down here in your absence to see if I could find the packet of letters which you refused to give to Lady Ilfracombe.’

‘The packet of letters!’ he exclaimed, completely startled out of his usual prudence. ‘How can you know anything about her letters? Who can have told you?’

‘No one has told me. My bedroom window is up there, and I overheard you talking to her to-night. I did not miss a single word of your conversation.’

‘By George!’ cried Portland. ‘Well, then, there would be no use in my disguising the matter. She has been a horrid little flirt; but there’s no harm about her now. Understand that plainly.’

‘Then why did you tempt her to meet

you here to-night? You must know what a rupture it would make between her and the earl if it became known?’

‘I shall take good care it does not get known. But I want to pay her out for her past conduct to me. She is the sort of lady that it is as well to keep the whip hand over.’

‘When you want to make money out of her husband. Yes; I understand perfectly. So you have not let poor Ilfracombe out of your clutches yet, Mr Portland. How much longer is he to be fleeced?’

‘You speak boldly, Miss Llewellyn; but, if I remember rightly, you always used to do so.’

‘In *his* cause, yes.’

‘And so you meant to steal my property, eh? and restore it to her ladyship?’

‘If it were possible. But I begin to be afraid you spoke the truth when you said the letters were not here. They are not in the dispatch-box, at all events. Oh, Mr

Portland, if you have them, do give them to me.'

'In order that your heartless little rival—the woman who has supplanted you with Ilfracombe—may go scot-free? What do you suppose she will do for you in return? What she has already done—persuaded her husband to leave Usk at once. They go to-morrow!'

Nell drew a long breath.

'To-morrow? Oh, that is soon. Nevertheless let her have back her letters, Mr Portland, if only in return for all the kindness *he* has shown you. You could never use them against her. It would be impossible; and withholding them might urge her on to confide the matter to her husband, which would mean a break-up of your long intimacy with him.'

'By Jove! you are an eloquent pleader, Nell!' exclaimed her companion, looking at her admiringly, 'and there's more good in your little finger than in her ladyship's whole body. You're doing this for Ilfracombe's sake, I can spot that fast enough;

but if you believe all her protestations about loving him you are easily gulled. She cares for no one but herself; she never did; but she's in a mortal fright lest I should peach and make ructions between them. Which there would be, I can assure you, when I tell you that if it were in my power, I would not marry the woman who wrote such letters as I have in my possession. By George! you should see them. They would make your eyes open. You would not have written such epistles to save your life.'

'Perhaps not,' she answered quietly. 'Letter-writing was never much in my line. But if what you say is true, it is all the more necessary that they should be destroyed. Give them to me, Mr Portland, I implore you, for the old time's sake.'

'Do you know what you are asking, Miss Llewellyn? To be allowed to do the best turn in your power (or the power of anyone) to the woman who inveigled Ilfracombe from you; to make a heartless, reckless girl, who is only afraid of im-

perilling her position in society, at her ease for evermore; to set her free to bamboozle some other man as she bamboozled me.'

'Oh, no, no. I do not believe that. She loves her husband. You might hear it in the very tone of her voice.'

'*The very tone of her voice!*' echoed Jack Portland sneeringly. 'What a judge of character you must be. Why, Nora Ilfracombe is a thorough actress, and can change her voice at will. How Ilfracombe can ever have been so infatuated as to make her his countess beats me. And to see him lolling on the sofa by her side, and devouring her with his eyes is sickening. He's over head and ears in love with her, and she wants to keep him at her feet. That's the long and the short of it.'

'But you told her just now that it was / whom he loved,' cried Nell quickly.

'Did I? That was only to make her ladyship waxey. Ilfracombe has forgotten all about you long ago—'

'I—I—think you are mistaken,' replied

Nell in a constrained tone ; ‘ but you cannot blame the countess for wishing to keep him as much with her as possible. And—and—since it is all over for you and me, Mr Portland—since you have lost *her*, and I have lost *him*—would it not be better and nobler to leave them alone for the future, and put no obstacle in the way of their happiness? ’

‘ And what would you do with the packet of letters if I did deliver them over to you? ’

‘ I would take them to her at once and give them her on the promise that she would never be so foolish as to meet you secretly again.’

‘ And you think she would thank you—that she would be grateful? ’

‘ *He* would, if he knew it,’ she replied.

‘ Ah, it’s all for *him* still, though he cast you off, like a worn-out glove. You women are inexplicable creatures. It seems to me that the worse you are treated the closer you stick.’

‘ Never mind that. Will you give me the letters? ’

‘I will, on one condition.’

‘What is it?’

‘Nell, do you remember what I said to you once in Grosvenor Square and you were so angry with me for saying? I knew then that Ilfracombe was contemplating marriage, and that you would be left without a home, and I loved you. Yes, you may stare as you like, but it is the truth. Such love as it is in my nature to feel, I have felt, and do feel, for you. I admire you—not only personally, but your courage, your pride, your determination. I admire the ease with which you accepted your equivocal position under Ilfracombe’s roof—the humility with which you deferred to his will, even when it came to leaving you alone in London for four months whilst he gallivanted after Miss Nora Abinger.’

‘Oh, spare me, Mr Portland, spare me!’ cried Nell, ‘let the past alone, it is too painful a recollection to me. I know I was furious with you. I had a right to be, but my high spirits are all gone. If it were so, I should not stay to listen now.’

‘But I am not going to say one word that the most virtuous matron in England might not hear. I repeat that you are the only woman for whom I have ever experienced any genuine feeling, and if you really want to save your late friend from a very painful humiliation (which will inevitably come some day, by the exhibition of those letters), I will give them to you to do with as you will—if you will marry me.’

‘*What?*’ she exclaimed, starting backward.

‘I mean what I say. I know that my former proposal was a different one, but I have altered my mind since then. I offer to marry you—to give you my name, which is, at all events, that of a gentleman, though I’m afraid a rather shady one, and—Lady Ilfracombe’s letters.’

‘But Mr Portland, you do not know what you are asking. My heart is not the least changed since those days. Ilfracombe’s conduct—his marriage—have made no difference to me. I wish they had. I wish

I had got over my trouble, and could go to you, or any man, with a clear conscience and say, "I love you." But I cannot, I never shall. My soul is bound up in that of Ilfracombe. He is *my* husband—not that woman's. I think of him every day; pray for him every night by that name. I know he has deserted me, but I have never deserted him, and there were reasons in his case that made marriage a necessity. It has not destroyed his love for me; that is as true and strong as ever. And it would be impossible to me, whilst his love lasts, to be any other man's wife.'

'Who told you that Ilfracombe loves you still—that is, if he ever loved you.'

'He told me so himself, only last night when we met in the meadow. He said he wished he had married me when he felt disposed to do it, years ago.'

'If he said that, he's a scoundrel and a liar,' cried Jack Portland.

'Mr Portland, how dare you speak so? No one shall call Lord Ilfracombe such names in my presence. He was never

dishonest or untrue. He was always the best and kindest and most generous of men to me—just as you heard his wife say this evening—and whoever speaks against him must be my enemy.'

'I am not that,' replied Jack Portland. 'Now, look here, Miss Llewellyn. The facts are these: Ilfracombe, whatever he may have said to you is simply infatuated with his wife. He defers to her will—follows her about like a lamb with a blue ribbon round its neck—and obeys her in everything. No one who sees him can help observing how madly in love he is. That is my hold over her. Ilfracombe loses a great deal of money to me. I don't deny it. His money is useful to me, and it is in my power to ruin him if I choose. Indeed I have done a little that way already. Two years ago in Malta I met his wife, then Nora Abinger, and had a pretty hot flirtation with her. There was no real harm in it, but there was not much bloom left on the plum for the next comer, and she compromised herself in so many ways that no prejudiced person

would think our acquaintanceship had been an innocent one. A case of circumstantial evidence, certainly, but so are most cases that end fatally for the actors in them. Well, to speak plainly, this is how I stand with the earl and countess. I could ruin them both to-morrow if I chose, and it is for you to render me harmless—draw the dragon's teeth, in fact, and transform him into a lamb.'

Nell had grown very white as Portland alluded to Ilfracombe's affection for his wife, but still she shook her head and repeated,—

'I couldn't—indeed, I couldn't.'

'When I spoke to you last,' persisted Portland, 'things were quite different. Then you expected your lover to return to you any day, and you were horrified at the idea of stepping from one equivocal position to another. Now all is changed. Ilfracombe will never live with you again. You are sure of that. He has left you unprotected, and thrown you back upon a life for which he unfitted you without any prospects for the future—a ruined woman, yet with all the

instincts of a lady. And I offer you marriage—an honest position if nothing else, and a return to some of the luxuries of life to which you have been so long accustomed. Is it not worth thinking over?’

Nell looked at Jack Portland steadily. She had always hated and despised him, and never more so than at the present moment—but he held the fate of Ilfracombe in his hands. He could ruin his fortunes and destroy his domestic happiness—and he put it in her power to save him. What if she could do it? Would it be a greater sacrifice than flinging herself into the water had been? Could it be a crueller fate than that which she endured now? Could anything—even marriage with Jack Portland, prove more bitter than her present existence and the bare outlook for the future?

‘What security would you give me—in case of my complying with your proposal—that my sacrifice would not be wasted, that you would not continue to lead Ilfracombe into extravagance and folly until you had ruined him?’

‘Your best security would lie in the possession of her ladyship’s letters,’ was the reply. ‘She has such a wholesome dread of my producing them at present that she dares not influence her husband to give up my acquaintance. But Madam Nora hates me too genuinely to delay setting her own machinery in motion one minute after she knows she has no more to fear from me. Set your mind at ease on that score, Miss Llewellyn. The whole matter lies in a nutshell—my possession of those letters. They are the locks of Samson—the heel of Achilles. Once take them out of my hands and I am powerless to harm—my vulnerable spot is found.’

‘Tell me all your conditions,’ continued Nell in a low voice.

Jack Portland’s eyes glistened as he exclaimed eagerly,—

‘They shall not be difficult ones, my dear. If you will consent to come with me and be married at the registrar’s office the letters are yours.’

‘No, no, I will not trust you, Mr.

Portland. I must have the letters first.'

'I have greater faith than you have. I believe I *can* trust you. You are too noble a woman to deceive me.'

'If I say I will marry you I will marry you. You may rely on that. My worst enemies never called me a liar. But I promise nothing more.'

'I ask for nothing more,' replied Mr Portland. 'Come, I will make a bargain with you, Nell. I will ride into Newport to-morrow morning and get the licence. We must give them twenty-four hours' notice; and the next day we will be married, and as soon as the ceremony is over the letters shall be placed in your hand. Will that satisfy you?'

'No; I must be allowed to examine them first, to make sure they are the original ones, and I must have your attestation in writing that you have never received any others from Miss Abinger, and that if at any time such should crop up they will be forgeries. Else how can

I be sure that it—it—might not all be in vain?’

‘You know how to drive a hard bargain, Nell, but I agree. Give me yourself, and I am willing to give up everything on earth in exchange. So it is a bargain then. To-morrow, or rather to-day (for the dawn is breaking), is Thursday, and to-morrow, Friday, will be our wedding day.’

‘An unlucky day,’ said Nell, with a slight shiver. ‘But I have not promised yet. You must give me till this afternoon to think it over, Mr Portland. It has been too hurried a proposal.’

‘Oh, come, I say, that’s too bad. You’ve as good as said you’d consent. I’m in downright earnest, Nell, ’pon my soul I am, and as far as in me lies I’ll make you a good husband. Now don’t be afraid. I know you never had a great opinion of me, but I’m going to reform now, on my word I am, and turn over a new leaf if you’ll only help me. Come now, say it’s a settled thing.’

‘Not till this afternoon,’ she reiterated. ‘Be here at two o’clock, and I will give you my final answer then. But only under the conditions I have named. I must have the letters beforehand to examine, and the assurance that you have kept none of them back, and then you shall deliver them to me in the registrar’s office. On no other terms will I meet you there.’

‘All right, I agree to them. But now you had better go, or Lennox may come rushing in. Good-night. Are you not going to kiss me before you leave?’

Nell shook her head.

‘There will be time for that afterwards,’ she said gravely. ‘And don’t forget, Mr Portland, that I have held back nothing from you to-night, and that I come to you with no disguise. You have seen into my heart. If you elect to buy an empty casket don’t blame the seller.’

‘I shall blame no one and nothing,’ he replied. ‘I am only too pleased to get you on any terms. I see you do not believe me when I say I love you, and

have loved you all along. You think such a word from my lips a sacrilege, but still it is true, and I shall try to make you love me in return. I am a wild, reckless, perhaps dishonourable fellow, but I have one soft spot in my heart, and that is for you. I shall be here without fail at two o'clock this afternoon. Mind you have your answer ready. And mark you, Nell,' he continued rather fiercely, 'if it is "No" the fate of the Ilfracombes is sealed. I shall not be able to bear the disappointment. I shall lay it at his door, and I will take my revenge without delay. You understand?'

'Yes, perfectly. And I *think* my answer will not be "No."'

She passed away through the narrow passage as she spoke, and Jack Portland stood and watched her disappear with a new feeling in his heart.

As for Nell, when she had reached the sanctuary of her own room, her thoughts were not of this extraordinary engagement to marry—so suddenly and unexpectedly

entered into, and with all men in the world, Jack Portland—she did not think of the sacrifice she was about to make, and for her rival, Lady Ilfracombe. No, her whole mind was bent on solving one question, the only thing which affected her in the whole transaction—did Lord Ilfracombe really love his wife, as Mr Portland said he did? What incomprehensible animals women are! She loved this man with her whole soul. She desired his happiness and welfare above all earthly things. She had been ready to throw her life away when she heard he had deserted her. She was ready now, for his sake, and to save the honour of his name, to take upon herself a marriage the very thought of which she loathed and abhorred; but she could not bear the idea that he was happier in his love for his wife than he had been with her, that he had forgotten, in fact, the days which they had spent together, or was glad that they were gone. Her inward cry still was, ‘Tell me you love me best of all the

world, and the other woman can have your title and your money.'

To hear Jack Portland expatiating on the earl's infatuation for his countess had been the bitterest thing Nell had yet been called upon to bear—the motive which had made her consent, against her will, to become his wife. But yet she did not quite believe it. She recalled Ilfracombe's affectionate words of the evening before, his pleasure at meeting her again, his regret that he had not done the right thing by her years before, and was resolved to know the truth for herself before she finally sealed her fate by consenting to Mr Portland's proposal. As she cogitated thus, all in a cold tremble and flutter, Nell came to the desperate resolve to seek an interview with the earl, and tell him of this proposal, and ask his advice whether she should marry or not. Then she should see, she said to herself, by his look, his manner, his sorrow or his joy, if he loved her still. But he would not let her marry, she felt certain of that, and smiled as she thought of it; but then

the letters, those fatal letters, what would become of him and the countess if she declined? She sat by the window until it was time to dress herself anew without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN she descended to the parlour her father and mother were already seated at the breakfast-table. To her courteous 'good-morning' they vouchsafed no reply. They were evidently still displeased with her for her rebellion of the night before. Nell went up to the farmer's side and laid her hand on his.

'Father,' she said in a trembling voice, 'I have been thinking over what you asked me yesterday, and I am willing to do as you say. I will go to Lord Ilfracombe and ask him to intercede with Sir Archibald Bowmant about the raising of your rent.'

This avowal changed the manner of both the old people at once.

'That's my good lass!' exclaimed her

mother. 'I knew you wouldn't hold out against father and me for long.'

'Well done, Nell!' replied Mr Llewellyn; 'and you'll succeed, my girl, for it's few men, be they lords or ploughboys, that would like to refuse anything to a face like yours.'

'Lor'! father, don't go puffing the maid up on her good looks,' cried his wife. 'Handsome is as handsome does; that's my motto. But I don't think his lordship will refuse her all the same; for he was rare generous to her whilst she was in service. Ah, Nell, 'twas the foolishlest thing as you ever did to chuck up that place. You might find out, whilst you're about it, if there should happen to be a vacancy in her ladyship's house now.'

'All right, mother,' said Nell gently; and then, drawing a letter from her pocket, she continued—'I wrote this note to Lord Ilfracombe last night, father; and, if you approve it, you might send it over to the Hall by Tom.'

She unfolded the paper and read,—

‘MY LORD,—My father wishes that I should speak to you on a matter important to himself. If it should be quite convenient, will your lordship send word by the bearer at what hour this morning I could have a few minutes’ conversation with you?—Yours respectfully,

‘E. LLEWELLYN.’

‘A very proper note,’ said her mother approvingly.

‘Ay, and don’t our Nell write a neat hand?’ put in the farmer. ‘You’re a rare scholar, Nell, though I don’t know where you got it; for Hetty, who had the same advantages, can’t do more than manage a few words, and them not legible. It’ll do rarely, my lass, and is just the thing I wanted. His lordship can’t refuse so simple a request. I’ll send Tom over with it at once.’ And he rose from the table for the purpose.

‘Come now, my girl, sit down, do, and

eat your breakfast,' quoth Mrs Llewellyn, seeing that her daughter still lingered by the window.

'No, thank you, mother. I don't feel like eating this morning. I wrote the letter because I don't like to cross father, but I've a faint heart about it. The earl may not like to be worried now he is out for a holiday, and I'd be loath to make him angry.'

'Nonsense, Nell. He must be a cranky fellow if a little note like yours would put him out. He can but say, "No," lass, and then there'll be no harm done. But if you hadn't writ it, father would likely have always thought you might have saved the rent if you'd a mind to, so it's just as well to humour him. Come, take your tea, or I'll be angry.'

The girl drank the cup of tea which her mother handed her, and took up her station again by the window.

If he should be angry, she thought; or if he should be engaged and unable to see her, how could she face the other

without knowing the worst, or the best? And if the best, what then? Her life seemed to have become a tangled coil which she had no power of unravelling. In about half an hour she saw the hedger, Tom, shambling down the dell with a white envelope in his hands. She rushed forward feverishly to intercept him. It was stamped with the earl's coronet. Nell tore it open and devoured its contents.

‘MY DEAR MISS LLEWELLYN,—If you will be in Mrs Hody's sitting-room at eleven o'clock, I will come to you there for a few minutes.—Yours faithfully,

‘ILFRACOMBE.’

He would see her, then; she would see him! All, for the moment, seemed bright again.

Her parents were delighted with the news.

‘There, now, what did I tell ye?’ said Mr Llewellyn; ‘I knew no gentleman, let alone a lord, would refuse to see a

servant as had done her duty by him. You've done the job now, Nell, as sure as a gun. The earl will persuade Sir Archibald to lower the rent again, and mother and me will feel we owe it all to you. Give me a buss, lass! It's summat for a man to have such a handsome daughter to boast of. They may say as beauty's deceitful, but it beats brains any day. You've saved the old farm to us, my girl, and I'm thankful to you for it.'

'I'll do my best, dear father,' said Nell; 'but you mustn't make too sure. The earl, with all the good-will in the world, may not have the power, but I'm sure he'll try to get it done.'

'And when did you ever hear of a lord trying for anything that didn't succeed?' exclaimed her mother; 'it isn't as if he was a nobody! But come, my lass, you mustn't go up to the Hall in that soiled dress. You've a clean print in your drawers, so go and put it on, and make your hair tidy. It looks as if you'd been up all night.'

And the old woman bundled her daughter upstairs to look after her wardrobe.

‘Now, where did you put that nasty poison?’ she asked, as they entered the bedroom together.

‘Where you told me, mother; on the top of the wardrobe,’ answered Nell.

‘Have you written a label for it yet?’

‘No; I forgot to do so.’

‘Well, don’t you put it off another day,’ replied Mrs Llewellyn; ‘for father was quite vexed with me for letting the bottle go out of my hands. He says a wine-glassful of that stuff would kill the strongest man in Monmouth.’

‘No one can get at it there,’ said Nell, quietly.

‘That’s all right then, but I shouldn’t like for there to be an accident with it. Here, Nell, tie this blue silk handkerchief round your throat. You always look so nice in blue, I think.’

Nell assented passively to all her mother’s propositions, and, putting a straw hat on her head, walked slowly up the

meadow and through the pine plantation, to the private apartments of the housekeeper at the Hall.

‘Well, Nell,’ said Mrs Hody when she arrived there, ‘and so you’ve come to have a private audience of his lordship. He came to tell me he would see you here at eleven o’clock, but as it was a private matter, he did not wish to have it discussed in the dining-room, so I was to send him word quietly when you arrived. And what can you have to say to the earl, I wonder, as all the world can’t hear?’

‘I asked to speak to Lord Ilfracombe on some business connected with my father, Mrs Hody,’ replied Nell, blushing; ‘he was my former master, you know, or father would have come himself, but he thought his lordship would rather see me.’

‘Ah! well, I suppose it’s all right,’ responded the virtuous housekeeper; ‘but I should have thought the study or the gunroom would have been a fitter place.

However, now you're here, please to sit down, and I'll go and tell his lordship as you're come. You may have to wait a bit, I'm not sure as they've finished breakfast, but he'll be here, I suppose, before long. Bless me, but you do look dazed, Nell Llewellyn; that fever has run you down terrible. Will you have a glass of wine before I go?'

'No thank you, Mrs Hody,' replied the girl, as she sat down in a chair and leaned her aching head against the wall. Mrs Hody bustled out of the room, and it seemed ages to Nell before any one came to join her. She heard voices and laughter proceeding from the garden, and many other sounds indicative of life and enjoyment, but all about the housekeeper's domains, the intensest quiet seemed to reign. At last it was broken by the sound of a light quick footstep which made Nell's heart leap within her bosom, coming along the stone passage, and in another moment, the door opened and closed, and Lord Ilfracombe stood before

her. Nell struggled to her feet to meet him.

‘Oh! Vernie,’ were her first words; ‘it is not my fault.’

‘Hus—h’ said the earl, as he opened the door again and listened to hear if by any chance they could be overheard; ‘you mustn’t call me by that name, Nell, lest any of the servants should have a mind for eavesdropping.’

It was a small thing and a very natural thing for him to say, but it fell on the girl’s excited spirits like a cold douche.

‘I forgot, forgive me,’ she recommenced; ‘it was not my fault (I was going to say) that you received that note,—my lord. I would not have sent it to the Hall on any account, but my father fancied I might have some influence with you in a certain matter, and insisted on my asking to see you.’

‘It is all right,’ he said kindly; ‘only we must keep to the business—you understand.’

‘Oh! yes,’ she answered, with a catch in

her breath, 'and it is soon told. My father has been a tenant of Sir Archibald's for many years, twenty-five, I think, or more, he has lived at Panty-cuckoo Farm all his married life, and both I and my sister were born there. Father has done a great deal for the land, and spent a lot of money on it, but Sir Archibald Bowmant keeps raising the rent until he fears it will be impossible for him to keep it on, and he thought perhaps—father thought that—you might be able to help him by your influence with Sir Archibald.'

'But I don't quite understand,' said the earl; 'what is it Mr Llewellyn wants me to do, Nell?'

'He fancied you might be able to remonstrate with Sir Archibald, because it is so unfair.'

Lord Ilfracombe looked grave.

'I am sorry to refuse any request of your father's, but I really don't see my way to it. I am not a friend of Sir Archibald's, you see. I am quite a new acquaintance, and I know nothing of his

monetary affairs. I am afraid he would resent any interference on my part as a liberty.'

'I told father so, replied Nell, whose eyes were fixed on the earl all the time. 'I thought just the same myself, but he was so obstinate. I did not know how to refuse him, without—raising his suspicions.'

'Ah—!' replied Ilfracombe, thoughtfully, '*now*, don't you see the imprudence of refusing to accept any settlement at my hands, Nell? You might have helped your father in this emergency.'

'Not with *your* money, Lord Ilfracombe, given in such a cause. You don't know my father. He would have died sooner than have taken it.'

'Like his daughter,' said the earl; 'well, you don't know how unhappy you have made me by refusing all assistance at my hands; and since I met you the other evening and learned that you were alive, you have occupied all my thoughts, Nell. I will tell you what I will do, if possible. I will ask Sir Archibald Bowmant if he

will sell me Panty-cuckoo Farm, and if he will part with the property, and I become your father's landlord, he need not fear my raising the rent to him, I should feel much more inclined to lower it. And then some day, Nell, when you marry, as I have done, you will let me settle the old farm on you as a wedding present, and set my poor conscience at rest for evermore, won't you?'

Nell set her teeth hard together as she replied,—

'Would you like to see me married, would it make you happier?'

There was not much need for him to answer, the light that illumined his whole face at the idea was sufficient answer.

'Is there any chance of it?' he asked her, eagerly.

'There is an excellent chance if I chose to accept it. A man, a gentleman, who knows the circumstances of my life, and so cannot say afterwards that I have deceived him, has made me an offer of marriage, though I have not yet definitely accepted him.'

'And do you like him, Nell? Will

he be kind to you?' said Ilfracombe. He would have liked to see her respectably married, for whilst she lived as she was doing now she was a constant reproach to him, but, like all his sex, though unwilling to accept the responsibility himself, he did not *quite* like the idea of any other man possessing what had been his. But he stamped down the feeling. It would decidedly be for the best, he said to himself.

'Does he love you? Would he be good to you?' he repeated anxiously.

'He *says* he loves me,' she answered slowly, 'and I shall take good care he is not unkind to me.'

'A man would be a brute who could be unkind to you,' said the earl, with deep feeling in his voice, 'Nell, I think that your illness has made you more beautiful than ever. It has refined your whole appearance. But this man—I am glad he is a gentleman; you are not fit to be the wife of a clown, and you can hold your own with any lady in the land.'

‘So you advise me to marry him,’ she said, raising her large liquid eyes to his face.

Ilfracombe remembered afterwards how much they looked like the eyes of a dumb animal that regard you patiently, never mind what pain you may be putting it to, but at the time he only saw their pathetic beauty.

‘My dear girl,’ he replied, drawing nearer to her, and taking her hand in his; ‘how can I do otherwise than advise you to accept this proposal, that is if the fellow has enough to keep you in a decent position of life. It is hard for a woman to fight the world alone, Nell. You are very beautiful, and the world will look kindly on you whilst you remain so; but beauty does not last for ever, and when the evil days of old age and perhaps penury come, it is well for a woman if she is an honoured and respected wife. You know I must feel very deeply on this subject, for the reason that *I*, in my reckless thoughtlessness, have done so much to mar your

prospects of making a good marriage; but if I find that, spite of all, you *do* marry well, I shall be a very grateful and a very happy man,'

'If I knew that you would have no regrets,' said Nell, with white parched lips; 'if I were sure that you loved your wife, and she loved you—'

'Oh, if that assurance will make your task easier, my poor Nell, let me give it you,' cried Ilfracombe; 'and indeed I am sure it is better in any case, since everything between us two is over, that we should understand each other perfectly on that point. I *do* love my wife with all my heart, and I hope—nay, I believe she loves me almost as well. You could hardly suppose that I should have married her else—under the circumstances. She had no money, no particular birth, and no particular good looks. What should I have married her for, except for love? But she took me completely by storm the first time I met her, and I have been at her feet

ever since. So you need have no scruples on that score. And I believe, Nell — indeed, I feel sure that if you were married, and especially to a gentleman, Nora would prove a true friend to you. She is a warm-hearted girl without any affectation about her, and I told her the history of our acquaintance, and she was genuinely sorry for your fate. You need fear nothing from Nora. She will be as glad to hear you are happily married as I shall be.'

'That is enough,' said Nell, in a low voice, 'that settles the matter my lord, but I thought I should like to hear you say so with your own lips first. The next thing you will hear of will be my marriage.'

'But when is it to be Nell, and what is the happy man's name?' asked the earl in quite a new voice, it was so merry, and buoyant, and relieved.'

'Oh, you will know all that in good time,' replied the girl, trying to imitate his cheerfulness; 'it is not quite a settled thing yet, but it will be soon now.'

‘And you will not refuse to take a wedding present from me, Nell, for the old times’ sake, will you?’ said Ilfracombe, insinuatingly; ‘perhaps it may be Panty-cuckoo Farm, who knows? If Sir Archibald consents to part with it, and then you will be your father’s landlord. Wouldn’t that be funny? How surprised the old people would be when you showed them the title-deeds. And you will let me have the very first intimation of the event, won’t you?’

‘I will, my lord,’ said Nell, in a dull, constrained tone.

‘No, no, Nelly, not that. I was only obliged to caution you just now, because the servants are so beastly curious in this house. But we are quite alone, and you must call me ‘Vernie’ again, just once more, and kiss me as you used to do in the old days.’

She turned and caught him passionately to her breast, and murmured in his ear, ‘Vernie, Vernie. God bless you for ever.’

‘God bless you Nell,’ he responded as he kissed her heartily in return.

‘I am going now,’ she said presently with trembling lips, ‘and we may not meet again — not just yet. You offered to do great things for me, Vernie, but I would rather you were a friend to my old father. If — if — anything should happen to me, will you be kind to him for my sake? Give him a little help if he should need it, dear, or become his landlord if possible, which would please me better than anything.’

‘I will be his friend and yours, Nell, to my life’s end,’ replied Ilfracombe; ‘and if I cannot purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, and matters grow worse here, he shall have one of my own farms in Huntingdonshire, and be comfortable for the rest of his days. But why do you say, “if anything should happen to you?” What should happen, my dear? You are getting well and strong, and shall live to a hundred years with your good man.’

‘Do you think so?’ replied the girl,

with a sad smile. 'Well, if I do, my parents shall owe their comfort to no other hand than mine; and if I don't, you will not forget your promise to me.'

And before he could say another word to her, she was gone. The two old people were waiting her return with the greatest anxiety, and exuberant were their rejoicings when they heard the news she had to tell. The earl had not only promised to try and purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, but had said that in the event of his failure, he would transplant them all to one of his own farms in Huntingdonshire.

'Ay,' exclaimed the old man, 'though it'll be a sore wrench to leave Panty-cuckoo, it will be a fine thing to live under his lordship's tenancy. Sir Archibald, he's only an upstart when all's said and done. His father was the first baronet, and it takes centuries to make 'em know their places. He wouldn't never have thought of sweating the tenantry for to pay his own rates and taxes, if he's been a thorough-bred 'un, but I suppose

he knows no better. But the Earl of Ilfracombe, why, of course, *he* knows how to treat those that work to make the prosperity of the country. He's a real aristocrat, born and bred, and wouldn't demean himself to raise a man's rent to pay for his own extravagances. Whatever we might feel at leaving the old farm, lass, I don't know if we wouldn't be wiser to take his lordship's offer at once, and transplant all our goods and chattels to Huntingdonshire.'

'But you mustn't do anything in a hurry, father,' exclaimed his wife, alarmed by the rapidity of her good man's ideas; 'you must wait till we have word from his lordship. But it's a fine thing you thought of sending our Nell over to the Hall to speak with him. It's made our fortunes. We shall all be the better for it, sha'n't us, my lass?'

'Yes, *all*,' replied her daughter in a dull tone, as if she were dreaming.

'Now I declare girl, if you haven't got one of your muddly fits on again,' said

Mrs Llewellyn. 'If you spoke to his lordship in that sort of way, I wonder he ever listened to you. He must have thought you were half asleep. It all comes of your taking no breakfast. Who ever heard of a healthy young woman beginning the day on an empty stomach? It's absurd to think of such a thing.'

Nell went up to her mother, and kissed her wrinkled forehead.

'Never mind, mother,' she said gently; 'don't grumble at me to-day, for I don't feel as if I could bear it. You shall think better of me to-morrow, I promise you.'

And she left the farmer and his wife to congratulate each other on the possession of so handsome a daughter, that no one could find it in their hearts to refuse her anything.

And Nell sat in her own room, thinking — thinking. It was nearing the hour when she had promised to give Mr Portland her answer. He had agreed to come to that place for it, and stand under her

window till she appeared to give it him. He was more eager for it than one would have given him credit for. He had lain awake the night before, wondering if Nell had really meant what she said, and what his life would feel like when she brought her gracious presence into it. He could jest and be sarcastic with her when he saw no likelihood of her consenting to marry him, but now that she had half consented, his feelings seemed already to have become somewhat purified by the very possibility of such a thing. Perhaps those few hours of anticipation formed the best part of Jack Portland's existence — the least like the years that had gone before it. He felt humbled as he looked back upon the past — fearful as he contemplated the future. For the first time, he knew himself to be utterly unworthy of the regard or the possession of a good woman. And as he stood beneath Nell Llewellyn's window, he felt certain that she would tell him she could not consent to such a step. Fancy, his relief and

pleasure when she looked for a moment from the casement and said :

‘ Mr Portland, I have made up my mind, and *it is to be.*’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE licence having been procured, the marriage ceremony before the registrar of Usk was accomplished in a very few minutes. Jack Portland had only to meet Nell at the office the following morning, and in half-an-hour they walked out again man and wife. The girl was very calm and collected over the whole affair—so calm indeed, that her new-made husband looked at her with surprise. They walked back to their respective destinations by a by-path, so that they might converse unseen, though nobody in Usk would have been very much astonished if they had encountered one of the gentlemen from the Hall taking a stroll with such a notorious beauty as Farmer Llewellyn's daughter.

‘Well, Nell,’ commenced Jack Portland,

‘so it really is *un fait accompli*, and you are Mrs Portland. Have you told the old people yet?’

‘No! I waited until, as you say, it should be an accomplished thing.’

‘When shall you break the news to them? Won’t they be very much surprised? How will they take it, do you think?’

‘Oh! they will only feel too honoured at my having made such a good match—at my having married a “real gentleman,”’ replied Nell, with quiet sarcasm. ‘What else should farmers feel?’

‘You’ll have to tell them before you join me at “The Three Pilchards” this evening.’

‘Perhaps! It depends on what humour they may be in. At all events, you can announce the fact to them to-morrow morning.’

‘What a funny girl you are, to want to run away from home in so secret a manner. Is it because of Ilfracombe’s vicinity? Are you afraid he will be jealous? It would

be very unjust if he were. A regular dog-in-the-manger sort of business.'

'No! you are quite mistaken. I am afraid of no one and nothing. I am my own mistress, and free to do as I choose. It is my fad to have things as I say. But let us sit down here for a minute, whilst we decide exactly what we intend to do.'

She took a seat upon a grassy bank as she spoke, and drew a packet of letters from her pocket. Jack Portland sat down beside her, and regarded them ruefully.

'There go all my hopes of making any more money out of that muff Ilfracombe. Nell, you ought to think I value you very highly to have struck such a bargain with you as I have.'

'Do you think so?' she rejoined. 'Well, I prophecy, Mr Portland, that a day will come when you will look back and bless me for having had the courage to buy these letters from you, at whatever cost—a day when you will regard the life you have led hitherto with loathing and abhorrence, and scorn to do a dishonour-

able act. A day when you will thank heaven that you are an honest man, and live by honest work alone.'

'I am afraid that day is in the clouds, Nell, that is, if you call play dishonest, for I should never live to see it without.'

'I am not so sure of that. There must be something better in your nature than you have discovered yet, or you would not have offered to make a ruined woman like myself your wife.'

'Let us hope there is, for your sake. Now, as for our plans!'

'These are foolish Lady Ilfracombe's letters,' said Nell, handling the packet, 'and here is your affirmation that there are no more in your possession. Did you make the appointment with her in the meadow for this afternoon at five o'clock?'

'Yes; I wrote her a note to say I had received the packet from London, and would deliver it to her, without fail, at that hour.'

‘She has good reason to doubt the truth of your promise, but to see you in the meadow will not be compromising, so she will keep the appointment, and I shall be there to meet her. You will not expect to see me at “The Three Pilchards” before nine.’

‘Can’t you come earlier?’

‘Not without exciting the suspicions of my parents, and making my mother resolve to sit up to let me in again. It will be better as I say. At nine o’clock, or a little after, I shall be there. I hope the registrar will not blab the news of our marriage through Usk before that time.’

‘I think not. I pledged him to secrecy with a golden tip. But to-morrow everyone must know it, both at Usk Hall and Panty-cuckoo Farm.’

‘Oh, yes; certainly! To-morrow everyone must know it,’ replied Nell, in the same impassive tone; ‘and now we had better think of going back, Mr Portland.’

‘Not “Mr Portland” now, Nell, surely!’ said her companion. ‘You must call me “Jack.”’

‘“Jack!”’ repeated the girl, as if she were saying a lesson.

They rose together as she spoke, and proceeded towards the Hall. When they reached the farm gates, Nell slipped from him without any further farewell, and entered her father’s house. Jack Portland looked after her a little wistfully. He had married her, certainly, but had he gained her? Had she done it only to save Lord Ilfracombe from further disgrace and ruin—to save his countess’s reputation for the sake of his hitherto unblemished name? He was not quite sure, but he had a shrewd suspicion of the truth, and as Mr Portland turned away, he sighed.

Lady Ilfracombe was in high spirits at luncheon that afternoon. Jack had actually compromised himself to the degree of *writing* to assure her she should receive back her letters, and for the first time,

perhaps, she really believed him. Her eyes were dancing, and her cheeks flushed with expectation. When her husband asked her how she intended to spend the afternoon, she actually laughed across the table at Mr Portland, as she replied, that she had promised to take a stroll with his friend.

‘Old Jack and you going botanising together;’ exclaimed Ilfracombe; ‘that is a good joke. Well, I was going to ask him to ride over to Pontypool with me, but I suppose your sex gives you the prior claim.’

‘I should rather think so,’ said the countess; ‘at least, if Mr Portland deserts me, it will be the last time I ever make an appointment with him, so mind that, Mr Portland!’

‘Don’t alarm yourself, Lady Ilfracombe,’ replied Jack Portland, who also appeared to be in unusually good spirits that afternoon, ‘my word is my bond. Besides, as you leave Usk so soon, it may be my last opportunity of enjoying a *tête-à-tête*

with your ladyship for some time to come. Is the date of your departure definitely fixed?’

‘Definitely!’ replied the earl. ‘We start *en route* for Wiesbaden by the three o’clock train to-morrow afternoon. We don’t expect to be on the Continent more than a few weeks, Jack, and when we return to Thistlemere for the shooting, you must join us as usual.’

Mr Portland looked important.

‘Well, I’m not quite sure of that, old chap. It’s awfully good of you to ask me, but we will talk of it afterwards. If you don’t start till three to-morrow, I expect I shall have some news to tell you before you go.’

‘News!’ cried Lady Ilfracombe. ‘Oh, Mr Portland, what is it? Do tell us at once. What is it about? Anything to do with us, or does it only concern yourself? Is it good news, or bad? Now don’t keep us in this terrible suspense.’

‘How like a woman,’ exclaimed Mr Portland. ‘How much would you leave

for to-morrow at this rate. No, Lady Ilfracombe, my news must really wait. It will come on you as a great surprise, but I hope it won't be a disagreeable one. Now, there is food for your curiosity to feed on for the rest of this afternoon. Grand news, remember, and something you have never dreamt of before, the most incredible thing you could conceive.'

'You're going to be married,' cried Nora, with feminine audacity, which set the whole table in a roar.

'Well, you *have* drawn on your imagination, Lady Ilfracombe, this time,' said Sir Archibald. 'Mr Portland, married! I should as soon think of my kestrel hawk going in for the domesticities.'

'Jack married,' laughed the earl. 'Come, you have indeed thought of the most incredible thing you could conceive. We shall have you writing a novel after this, Nora. You have evidently a gift for imagining the infinitely impossible.'

'There must be something very ridiculous about me, I fear,' said Mr Portland,

‘that everyone thinks it such a far-fetched idea that I should settle down.’

‘*You* settle down, old man?’ replied Ilfracombe. ‘Yes, when you’re carried to your grave, not before. However, let us change so unprofitable a subject. You are booked then, Nora, for the day, so perhaps Lady Bowmant will permit me to be her cavalier.’

‘With pleasure, Lord Ilfracombe! I shall be delighted to get you to myself for a little, since you are going to be cruel enough to desert us so soon.’

They all rose laughing from table after that, and dispersed to their separate apartments.

It was pleasant and cool when Nora strolled out to the meadow to meet Jack Portland. Her thoughts were pleasant too. On the next day she was going to take her husband far away from the temptation of Mr Portland’s society, and she hoped before they met him again, to have persuaded Ilfracombe to give up play altogether. Those abominable letters

would be destroyed by that time. She was determined that she would burn them to ashes as soon as ever she got them in her hands, and then the coast would be clear before her and Ilfracombe for the rest of their married life. She hummed the air of a popular ditty to herself as she walked through the rich thick grass, expecting to see Mr Portland every moment coming to meet her with the longed-for packet in his hands.

Instead of which, a young woman plainly attired, came up to her and said,—

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Ilfracombe, but are you waiting for Mr Portland?’

Nora turned round exclaiming angrily,—

‘And what business is that of yours?’ when she recognised the speaker. ‘Oh, Miss Llewellyn, is that you? I—I—did not know you at first. Yes, I am waiting for Mr Portland, though I cannot think how you came to know it.’

‘Because he told me so himself, and commissioned me to deliver this packet to you?’

Lady Ilfracombe grew very red, as she took the letters.

‘He commissioned you to give them to me? It is very strange. I do not understand. He said he should be here himself. What on earth made him give this packet to you?’

‘Because I insisted on it; he could not help himself,’ replied Nell. ‘Lady Ilfracombe, do not be angry with me for mentioning it, but my bedroom at the farmhouse is over that occupied by Mr Portland, and I was at my window the night you visited him there, and heard all that passed between you about those letters.’

‘That was eavesdropping,’ exclaimed the countess with crimson cheeks, ‘and you had no right to do it. If you made use of what you overheard you would ruin me with my husband.’

‘Do you think me capable of such a thing? I should not have listened to a single word, unless I had thought I could do you a service by doing so. As soon

as I understood the dilemma you were in, and why you had sought that man, I resolved, if possible, to get the letters he was so meanly withholding from you.'

'*You* resolved?' cried Nora in surprise.

'Yes, and as soon as you and he had left to return to the Hall, I went down to his room and ransacked it in order to find them. I had not done so when Mr Portland came back and found me there,—after which there was an explanation between us, and I forced him to give them up to me—with a written affirmation that he has no more in his possession.'

'And he assured me that he had telegraphed to London for them, and only received them this morning.'

'If he said so, you might have been sure it was untrue.'

'Miss Llewellyn, you don't like Jack Portland any more than I do,' said Nora, looking straight in the other's face.

'I have no reason to do so, Lady Ilfracombe.'

'And you actually did this for *me*—how

good and sweet of you it was. I have not been used to receive such favours from my own sex. But why did you do it? What am I to you?’

‘You are *his* wife,’ answered Nell, in a low voice, ‘and he loves you. Lady Ilfracombe. I believe you know who I am.’

‘Yes, I think I do,’ said Nora with a little confusion; ‘I guessed it; I recognised you, when we first met, from your description. You—you—are Nell Llewellyn, are you not—who—who—’

‘Don’t be afraid of wounding me by saying it,’ replied Nell, gently; and don’t shrink from me, for I shall never intrude on your presence again.’

At these words, so sweetly and humbly spoken, all the generosity of Lady Ilfracombe’s nature was roused at once.

‘Shrink from you, my dear girl, and when you have just rendered me the greatest service possible?’ she exclaimed. ‘What a brute you must think me. Why should I? Neither you nor I is to blame,

and you have been so sorely injured. We are both Ilfracombe's wives, I suppose, in God's sight, though I happen to bear his name. It is funny, isn't it, that a Christian country should make such a wide difference between a few words pronounced by the law, and God's great law of Nature? But Nell, I am sorry for you, indeed I am, and always have been.'

'I believe you,' replied Nell. 'For I heard you say so that night. But I did not come here to speak with you of my own affairs, only to give those letters into your keeping, and to beg of you, as you value your reputation and your husband's happiness, never to have any secret dealings with Mr Portland again.'

'Indeed, you may be sure of that. He is a pitiless scoundrel, without heart or honour. I have suffered too much at his hands to trust him again. But how did you manage to get these letters from him? That is what puzzles me. How did you bribe him, or have you got him somehow in your power?'

‘It little matters,’ said Nell, with a shudder of remembrance; ‘he cannot harm me, and I shall not suffer in consequence. But you will let me speak plainly to you, Lady Ilfracombe?’

‘Say anything you like,’ replied Nora, ‘for I can never thank you enough for what you have done for me.’

‘When I lived with Lord Ilfracombe, I saw the bad influence this man had over him—how he led him into extravagance and vice, and took the occasion of their so-called friendship to rob him of his money and make him risk his good name.’

‘I have seen the same, of course,’ said the countess; ‘but Ilfracombe is so infatuated with Portland, that he will believe nothing against him. But now that I have these letters, I will make my husband break with him, if I die for it.’

‘Yes, do — *do!*’ cried Nell; ‘and if need be, tell him everything, so that he sees him in his true colours. Save Lord Ilfracombe from further contamination, as

you value his happiness and his honour.'

'And what am I to do for you, dear Nell?' asked Nora, as she took the other's hand. 'How can I make you happy in return for the great happiness you have given me? Let me do something for you. Don't be proud, as you were that day at the farm, and send me away miserable. Give me an opportunity of proving my gratitude.'

'Do you mean that? Do you say it in earnest?'

'Indeed, indeed I do.'

'Then love *him*, Lady Ilfracombe, love him with all your heart and soul, and never let him cast one regretful look backwards, or blame himself for things which were beyond his control. Tell him, if ever he should speak to you of me, that I acquiesced in all his decisions, and thought them for the best — that he was right to marry, and that I thanked God he had secured a wife who loved him, and whom I heard say so with her own lips.'

‘*You* loved him very dearly, Nell?’

Nell’s answer to this question was to sit down suddenly on the grass, and burst into tears, covering her poor face with her attenuated hands, and rocking herself two and fro in her speechless misery. Nora sat down beside her, and threw her arm round her waist. She remembered nothing then but that here was—not her husband’s former mistress—but another woman, as loving and as entitled to happiness as herself, who had lost by her gain.

‘Nell, Nell,’ she whispered. ‘Poor, dear Nell! Don’t cry. Ilfracombe remembers and loves you still. It is a cruel fate that makes our two lots so different. Oh, poor Nell! don’t sob like that or you will break my heart.’

And the countess put her arms round the other’s neck and kissed the tears off her cheeks. The action recalled Nell to herself.

‘Thank you,’ she said softly. ‘Thank you so much. I shall not forget that you

kissed me. But don't think because I cry that I am discontented, or wish things altered from what they are. I know now they are all for the best. Only love him—love him all you are able, and have no more secrets from him, and may God bless you both!’

‘I *do* love him,’ exclaimed Lady Ilfracombe; ‘and now that you have given me back my peace of mind, I shall be able to show my love for him with a freer conscience. Oh! it was terrible to feel his kisses or hear his praises, and know all the time that that horrid man might carry his threats into execution at any moment, and make my husband hate and despise me. I wonder where Mr Portland has gone? What will he find to say for himself when we next meet, I wonder?’

‘Perhaps you may not meet him. Perhaps he will take good care to keep out of your way.’

‘What a horrid, odious man he is!’ cried Nora. ‘I would rather be dead than married to such a man.’

‘So would I,’ said Nell; ‘but my task is done, and I must go. Good-bye, Lady Ilfracombe. I am glad to think I have made you so happy.’

‘But I shall see you again, Nell,’ suggested the countess. ‘We leave Usk to-morrow afternoon; but I shall tell the earl that I have met you, and he will come with me to wish you good-bye.’

Nell’s eyes had a far-away look in them, as she answered,—

‘To-morrow morning, then, Lady Ilfracombe, bring your husband over to the farm to say good-bye to me. And that will be the last, last time, remember. After that I will trouble you no more.’

‘You have never troubled me,’ cried Nora genially; ‘indeed I shall look back on this day in coming years, and say that you are the best friend I have ever had.’

Nell turned to her quite brightly, as she replied,—

‘Yes, yes, I hope you will. I should like to think that you and he thought of

me sometimes as your truest, though humblest friend. For that indeed I am to both of you.'

'I feel you are ; I shall tell Ilfracombe so this very night,' said Nora. 'Kiss me once more, Nell, and thank you a thousand times. Oh, how I wish I could repay you!'

'You *will* repay me by making him happy. But — you wear a silk handkerchief, Lady Ilfracombe — if you would give me that, in remembrance of this meeting, I should prize it more than I can say.'

Nora tore it impetuously off her throat.

'Take it!' she exclaimed, as she knotted it round that of Nell. 'How I wish you had asked for my jewellery case instead.'

Nell smiled faintly.

'I never valued jewels,' she said, 'though there was a time when I had plenty to wear. But this soft, little handkerchief that has touched your neck it shall go with me to my grave.'

So they parted, the countess dancing up the meadow steep again, with her letters in her hand, as if earth held no further care for her, and Nell walking slowly down the incline that led to the road, her head bent upon her breast, and her eyes cast downwards. One going up to the greatest joy that life holds for any woman, the love and faith of an honest man ; the other going downwards to all that was abhorrent and loathly. The success of the one dependent on the failure of the other ; the happiness of the one due to the despair of the other ; the triumph of the one built on the sacrifice of the other. Nora, who had been so self-willed and rebellious through life, saved from the effects of her escapades by Nell, who had borne her lot so patiently, and taken all her disappointments as righteous retribution. It appears unequal ; but it is the way things are worked in this world. The race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong. In the next world there will be

dust and ashes for some of the great and fortunate ones of this earth, and crowns for the lowly and the despised. And Nell Llewellyn's crown will sparkle with jewels as heaven is studded with its stars.

CHAPTER IX.

As the Countess of Ilfracombe returned to the Hall, with her packet of letters in her hand, her heart was very glad, but at the same time it was filled with soberer thoughts than it had indulged in for some time past. What was after all the great difference between her and Nell Llewellyn? She had not fallen, it was true—she had not openly disgraced herself—but what had her flirtation with Jack Portland been if not a lowering of her womanly dignity; a soiling of her purity; a smirching of the delicate bloom and whiteness that should have protected her maidenly life as with a veil? Nora felt terribly ashamed of herself as she remembered it. Her great fear had passed away, thanks to Nell's interest and intrepidity, and her mind had time to

think of other things. This poor despised girl had saved her from all sorts of horrors; preserved her husband's faith in her; his love for her; had placed in her hand, as it were, the whole happiness of her life. But she herself—if she destroyed these letters, as she fully intended to do, how would she be any better than before—any more deserving of Ilfracombe's affection and confidence? She would be safe, it is true, but safety did not constitute worthiness. And Nora had begun to long to *deserve* her husband's love—to be able to accept it with an unburdened conscience—feeling that there was nothing between them, not even a shadow cast from the past. Could she, she asked herself, as she wended homewards, ever summon up the courage to tell him everything, to make him the arbiter of her destiny, to constitute him her judge and await the sentence he chose to pronounce upon her? It would be very awful she thought, terrible beyond description; she did not think she could

possibly undergo such an ordeal. She pictured to herself Ilfracombe's stern face as he listened to the unfolding of a tale so dissonant to his own feelings, so unlike all he had conceived of her, so dreadful to hear of the woman of whom he thought so highly, who he had chosen for his wife before all others. Nora shuddered when she thought thus, and told herself that it could not be. She valued his good opinion and his affection too highly. But there was another side of the question. Without telling Lord Ilfracombe, her own part in the matter, how could she convince him of the treachery of Jack Portland towards them both; how induce him to break off, once and for ever, the dangerous intimacy which united them. Her husband might refuse to believe her mere word, as he had refused before. He was a loyal friend, and a generous man. He would not judge anyone on the unproved testimony of another person. Without the proof which those letters conveyed, would

she have any more influence with him than she had had before, when he pooh-poohed her warnings as the idle fears of a well-meaning but ignorant woman? And had she the courage for the sake of them both, and especially for the sake of the husband whom she was beginning to love far better than she did herself, to brave the verdict of Ilfracombe's displeasure, and tell him the whole truth? Nell had been courageous for both their sakes. From a worldly point of view she had no particular reason to care for the earl's interests, still less for those of the wife who had supplanted her; yet she had braved being called a thief, and any other hard name Mr Portland might have thought fit in his rage to cast at her, in order to do good to those who had in a measure wronged her. Nell was worth a thousand of Nora, so the wife of Ilfracombe said inwardly as she dwelt on these things. And musing after this fashion she reached the Hall, not much happier than she had left it. It was true

that she had regained possession of the letters which had made a nightmare of her married life, but they had not brought the peace with them which she had imagined they would. She was out of a certain danger, but she was still *herself*, that was what Nora thought, still, a wife who had deceived her trusting husband, and would not be cleansed in her own eyes till she had made a full confession of her sin. It was contemplating the divine forgiveness which Nell had extended to them both, the single-heartedness which she displayed, the patience and humility with which she bore her own sad lot, which was influencing Lady Ilfracombe almost unconsciously to imitate her as far as lay in her power.

Her indecision, combined with the promptings of the good angel within her, to do what was right, made Nora *distracte* and melancholy during the period of dressing for dinner, and when Lord Ilfracombe joined her he chaffed her on the bad effects of botanising with Jack.

‘You had much better have come out with Lady Bowmant and myself, Nora,’ he said; ‘we have had a rousing time, but you look as dull as ditch water. What has old Jack been saying to you to quench your spirits?’

‘Your dear particular friend has not been saying anything at all to me, Ilfracombe. I have not set eyes on him. He did not keep his appointment.’

The earl suspended his operations of dressing, and turned round to regard her with surprise.

‘Jack didn’t turn up?’ he ejaculated. ‘Why, what on earth can be the reason?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Nora; ‘and what’s more, I don’t care.’

‘Ah, my lady, that sounds very much like pique,’ exclaimed her husband, laughing; ‘but for Jack not to keep an appointment with you, I cannot understand such a thing. I hope nothing’s the matter with him.’

‘What should be the matter, Mr

Portland's like a bad halfpenny. He's bound to come back again.'

'And how did you spend your afternoon then, darling?' asked the earl; 'wasn't it very stupid? How I wish you had come with us instead.'

'I don't, Ilfracombe, for I have passed a very eventful afternoon. There is no time to tell you of it now, but you shall hear all it when we find ourselves alone again. There's the second gong; we must go down. Now we shall hear what Mr Portland has to say for himself.'

They heard it as soon as they entered the drawing-room, where their hosts were waiting for them.

'Our party will be smaller than usual to-night, I am sorry to tell you,' said Lady Bowmant. 'I have just had a note from Mr Portland to say he has been called away on important business till to-morrow. Isn't it extraordinary? He doesn't say where, or by whom? When did he get the summons? That is what puzzles me. He said nothing about it

at luncheon. In fact, he settled to take a walk with you, if I am not mistaken, Lady Ilfracombe.'

'Yes, but he did not come,' answered Nora,

'I never knew old Jack to do such a thing in his life before,' remarked the earl, 'he is generally so punctual in his engagements. And as for business, why, he has no business, except pleasure. The idlest, most unpractical man I ever knew. What *can* the matter be? I am quite curious to learn.'

'Well, we must manage to do without him to-night, at all events,' said Lady Bowmant, who appeared to be rather offended by the breach of politeness. 'I think Mr Portland might have given us a little more notice, but it is really of no consequence.'

'And he might have let my wife know he couldn't walk with her, instead of leaving her to cool her heels in the field waiting for him half the afternoon. I shall have a crow to pluck with Master Jack for this to-morrow.'

‘Oh, Ilfracombe! do you really think it is worth while?’ exclaimed Nora. ‘I hope none of you will let him imagine that his absence was of the slightest consequence.’

‘It becomes of consequence when he treats you with so little ceremony,’ replied the earl, as he offered his arm to his hostess to conduct her to the dining-room.

Mr Portland’s vagaries were not mentioned again during the evening; but when Lord Ilfracombe entered his wife’s room that night and found her resting on the sofa in her dressing-gown, instead of fast asleep in bed, the subject was renewed between them.

‘Why, my darling, how is this?’ he exclaimed, ‘is your book so interesting that you cannot tear yourself away from it, or are you not sleepy to-night?’

‘Neither,’ answered Nora, gravely. ‘I was only waiting for my husband.’

‘And now you have your husband,’ he answered playfully, as he cast himself down beside her, ‘what is it?’

‘I want to have a little talk with you Ilfracombe,’ she said, ‘and I don’t know how to begin.’

‘What is it all about, sweetheart?’ he asked her with a kiss. His manner was enough to disarm any amount of fears, but it was so confident that it made Nora still more nervous.

‘I wish you wouldn’t kiss me,’ she said, almost petulantly. ‘I am going to tell you something about myself, that will make you very angry, and then you will think I accepted your kisses on false pretences.’

‘I am sorry to hear you say that Nora,’ he replied; but whatever you may have done, I can assure you of my forgiveness beforehand, so you can take my kiss as an instalment in advance.’

‘Don’t you be too sure of that,’ said his wife. ‘It is something that happened before our marriage, and I wasn’t too good a girl then, I can assure you. I did all sort of awful things, and I feel sure you will wish you had never married me when you hear them.’

‘And why do you tell me of them now, my dear girl? We have been married a year, and you have never thought of doing such a thing before. Neither do I desire to hear anything about the past. Let it rest in peace. You know I was not a saint myself.’

‘But you told me all about that Ilfracombe, and I was so silly, I was too frightened to follow your example.’

‘But who dared to frighten you darling? Couldn’t you trust your husband?’ he said tenderly. Nora snuggled up close to his side and buried her face in his bosom as she whispered,—

‘No, because I loved you so, I was afraid of losing your love and esteem, if you knew what a wild reckless girl I have been. Ilfracombe, do you remember one day after we were engaged, when you asked me if I had ever had a lover before yourself, what I replied?’

‘That you had, had so many you couldn’t count them, I believe,’ said the earl, laughing.

‘No, no, not that, but that there had been one man to whom I was engaged, but papa would not hear of our marriage because he had no money.’

‘Yes! Well, what of him?’

‘It was Mr Portland,’ said Nora, with her face still hidden. But her husband, in his astonishment, sat bolt upright and put her away.

‘Jack, oh! impossible! Nora, why did you not tell me of this before?’

‘Because, oh, I am coming to that by-and-bye. But, indeed, it is true. He was at Malta, you may remember, just at that time, two years before I met you, and staying with his sister Mrs Loveless. He told you he had met me there. He was very different in appearance then from what he is now, and I flirted and “spooned,” with him till I fancied I was head over ears in love, and he incited me on to be far more wild than I had ever been before. When I look back and think how young and foolish I was, I see he behaved very badly to me.’

‘Tell me all, Nora,’ said the earl sternly.

‘I *will* tell you all; don’t be afraid, I used to creep out of my father’s house after dinner, and meet Mr Portland late at night, sometimes as late as twelve o’clock, and then sneak back again when everyone had gone to bed. We used to sit under the orange trees for hours, talking, and all that sort of folly, you know—’

‘Oh, yes, I know,’ acquiesced the earl with a groan.

‘And one day we went out in a boat and were caught in a squall and had to stay away till the morning. We were with people all the time in a little inn, and papa never found out that Mr Portland was with me, but he was!’

‘Any more pleasant stories to tell me?’ asked her husband.

‘No, that is the worst (bad enough too, isn’t it?), as far as I am concerned, but I was foolish enough during that time to write Jack a lot of letters. I used to write two and three times a day when

I didn't see him, and in them I spoke very freely of all the pranks we had played together. He wrote to me as well, of course, but when we parted I destroyed his letters, but he kept mine.'

'Hasn't he given them up to you?' demanded Ilfracombe quickly.

'I have them now; but listen quietly to me, Ilfracombe, for a moment. You were rather vexed with me when we first came home to Thistlemere, because I did not welcome your bosom friend with the cordiality you wished me to extend to him. Why, if I had had the courage to tell you the truth, you would have kicked him out of the house. For, from the moment we met again, whenever Mr Portland has seen my disapproval of his influence over you in racing and gambling matters, he has held the threat over my head, that if I tried to dissuade you from throwing your money away, he would hand over those letters of mine, and make you hate and despise me as much as he did.'

‘The scoundrel!’ said Ilfracombe between his teeth.

‘He has promised over and over again to restore me those letters,’ continued Nora, ‘and again and again he has broken his word. He never meant to give them to me at all, I am convinced of that. He knew that, as soon as I got them into my own hands, I should have the courage to speak to you, and prove to you how unworthy he is.’

‘How did you get them at last, then, Nora?’

‘Now comes the hardest part of my confession, Ilfracombe, and I shall never be able to make it whilst you look at me like that.’

The earl tried to smile as he replied,—

‘I am not angry with you, Nora, only utterly disgusted with Jack for turning out such a low blackguard, and with myself for being so blind as to believe him to be an honourable man.’

‘But you will be angry with me for

this. Two nights ago he told me that if I went over to his room at the farm I should receive my letters—and I *went*.'

'You visited Portland at his sleeping apartments? Oh, Nora, I thought you had too much pride in your position as my wife—too much respect for yourself—to do such a thing!'

'I would not have gone for anything but those letters,' she cried. 'Oh, Ilfracombe, believe me and forgive me! I never was a liar. He said they were in his despatch-box, and I was fool enough to believe him, and fell into the trap. And when I got there, he declared he had made a mistake, and must have left them in town—all lies, all lies!'

'Then how did you get them at last?'

'He wrote me a note this morning—here it is,' said Nora, as she produced it from her blotting-case—'to say he had telegraphed for the packet, and it had arrived from town, and if I would meet him in the meadow this afternoon I should

receive them. That was the secret of my taking a walk with him, you see, Ilfracombe. *I* take a walk voluntarily with the brute! I would rather be hanged, any day!’ cried Nora impetuously.

‘But he never came, you say.’

‘No; but someone else did. Can you guess who it was? That Miss Llewellyn from the farm. She is really your girl; she is no more drowned than I am, and, oh, she is so sweet and nice! However did you come to give her up for me?’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Nora!’ said the earl. ‘I knew some days back that Nell is still alive, but thought it just as well not to mention the subject to you. But did she bring you your letters?’

‘Yes, she did, the dear, good girl. She was at her bedroom window, which overlooks Portland’s, when I went there, and heard my entreaties to him to return my letters, and his brutal, sarcastic replies; so as soon as I was gone she

confronted him, and *made* him give them up to her—how, she did not tell me, only he did—and she brought them to me. Oh, I *was* glad! I kissed her a dozen times for her kindness.'

'But *why* did she do it?' demanded the earl. 'I cannot understand her interest in the matter, nor how she induced Portland to do what you could not. It was like Nell; she always was resolute and plucky; but what was the motive?'

'Her love for you, Ilfracombe,' replied his wife gravely, 'and her desire to keep your name untarnished. Oh! you have never known what was in her noble nature, that is very clear. She is twice the woman I am, or ever shall be. She ought to have been your wife, and she is fit for it.'

'Nora, Nell is a good girl, and I deeply regret the part I played in soiling her life; but there is only one wife in the world for me, and she is by my side. It was very good of poor Nell, very generous, very kind, to have done what

she has done for you, and we must think of some means of repaying her. And I am glad to tell you, for her sake and my own, that she is going to be married herself. She came to see me this morning about some business of her father's, and told me the news.'

'Going to be married!' repeated Nora, with womanly intuition. 'Are you *sure*?' She did not mention such a thing to me; and she looked so sad and spoke so sadly, she made me cry. I don't think she can be going to be married. And when I asked her what I could do to return her kindness, she said,—“Love him with all your heart and soul, and never have a secret from him again.”’

'And do you, Nora?' whispered Ilfracombe.

'What?'

'Love me with all your heart and soul.'

She turned, and threw her arms about his neck.

'I do—I do! my darling, and never

so much as at this moment. Neither will I ever have a secret from you again. There are the letters,' she continued, as she drew the packet from her pocket and placed it in his hand. 'They were written so long ago that I don't remember what is in them; but whatever it may be—good, bad or indifferent—read it all, dear, and judge me as you will. At all events, you will know the worst, and I need not fear that I am claiming your love under false pretences for the future.'

'And so this is the poor little packet that has kept us apart for so long,' murmured the earl, as he regarded it, 'but, thank God, has not been powerful enough to sever us from each other's confidence for ever. And you give me leave to do what I will with it—to read its contents from end to end?'

'Yes, yes. Only be quick about it; the suspense of your decision is so hard to bear. Perhaps, who knows, Ilfracombe, after you have seen the folly I have

written to another man, you may not wish to have anything to do with me again.'

'Yes, I should think that was very probable,' remarked the earl, with quiet amusement, as he placed the packet in the empty grate and lighted a match under it. 'See! Nora, that is how I read your poor little love-letters of long ago. How amusing they are! But, confound the things! they won't burn. Come, that's better. They're blazing up beautifully now; and I only wish I could see Mr Jack Portland blazing up with them!'

Lady Ilfracombe looked up joyfully.

'Oh, darling, is that true?' she exclaimed. 'Shall we never have our happiness interrupted more by looking on him again?'

'Why, rather not! What do you take me for? Do you think I would associate with the man who has played you such a dirty trick, and nearly upset our married happiness? No, my dearest; I value you

too much for that. Mr Portland has seen the last of any house which owns me as master.'

'Oh, Ilfracombe, you have made me so exquisitely happy! Oh, how I wish poor Nell were as happy as I am. I told her we were leaving Usk to-morrow, and promised that we would go over to the farm together first, and wish her farewell. You will come with me, won't you, darling?'

'Of course I will, since you wish it. You have behaved in a most generous manner regarding this young woman, Nora, and I shall never forget it. That reminds me that, according to my promise to her this morning, I have been sounding Sir Archibald as to the chance of being able to purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, and I find he is quite ready to sell it at a reasonable price. I fancy they are getting rather hard-up on account of her ladyship's extravagance. So I intend to close with him, and make over the title-deeds to Nell as a wedding present. She refused to let me

make any provision for her, as I think I told you, but this I shall insist upon.'

'Yes, do ; it was just like her, dear thing, to refuse your money. Ilfracombe, you owe her a great deal. She was very much attached to you. I could see that by every word she said.'

'Hush, Nora dear, don't allude to it now. You women are apt to grow sentimental when you get together, talking over the same man. She cared for me well enough—so did I for her ; but you see we are both going to be married, and live happy ever afterwards. That is the end of most fairy tales, whether they happen in this world or the other. Kiss me, my own darling, and tell me once more that you love me. That is the only thing that concerns us now.'

CHAPTER X.

MR PORTLAND had two reasons for not appearing at Usk Hall on the evening of the day he married Nell Llewellyn. In the first place, he did not fancy seeing the countess again after she had heard the truth about her letters ; in the second, he foresaw more difficulty in getting away, if he left it till after dinner. To have received a summons to London by telegraph or post in the afternoon, and to have been compelled to quit Usk at once, seemed more feasible to him than to announce his determination before the assembled company, to be submitted to their cross questioning—sent to the railway station in Sir Archibald's carriage, perhaps accompanied by the genial host himself, and to have to bribe the servants to conceal the fact that he never went at all. After that

evening, so he argued, when all the world must know that he had married Nell, he would not mind confessing the little ruse to which he had had recourse, and felt sure of receiving sympathy and forgiveness. So he went to 'The Three Pilchards' and engaged his rooms, and ordered his dinner in a state of pleased expectancy. The accommodation was not very grand — the *cuisine* would, doubtless, not be first-rate, but Nell had never been a *gourmande* nor a sybarite, and Mr Portland pleased himself with thinking how well he would treat her in the future. What with the various race-meetings he had attended, he had been pretty lucky lately, and the visit to Usk Hall had not failed to recoup him still more. He would be able to take his wife abroad to Paris or Italy, if she so wished it, and show her a little life. Perhaps, though, it would be better to run over to Monte Carlo or Hamburg, and so combine business with pleasure. How divinely handsome she was, 'a daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most divinely

fair!’ With what envious eyes he would be followed by the frequenters of the places he thought of. He had little fear that his wife would be recognised by the herd as Lord Ilfracombe’s former mistress. She had kept herself too much at home for that, and had hardly ever been seen in public whilst living with the earl. It would only be a few of his intimates who would be likely to know her again. And Jack Portland would not have concerned himself about it if they had. He had married his wife for himself—not for the world, and it was welcome to think what it liked of his choice. A few old cats, whose virtue had never been attacked during the best part of a century, might turn up their noses at her; but Nell was strong enough to hold her own, and so was he. If a thought crossed his mind that Ilfracombe, on hearing of his marriage with Nell, might insist on giving her as a wedding portion what she had refused as a peace-offering, we must do him the justice to say that it had no weight with him, excepting as it might

prove the earl's good feeling towards them both, and be the precursor of a renewed intimacy. For, if something of the kind did not interfere, Jack Portland felt that the condition Nell had made regarding the packet of letters would prove the quietus to his friendship with Ilfracombe. If the countess told her husband the whole truth, he would never receive him again. Of that he was certain. But there was the chance that, for her own sake, Nora would *not* tell him the truth, and in that case, if he heard of the marriage first, he might never be told of the other little affair at all, and the countess secure of herself, might join her husband in extending her hospitality to him. This was what Mr Portland was dreaming of as he sat in the parlour of 'The Three Pilchards' smoking, and waiting for Nell's arrival. As the time went on, and she did not appear, he grew rather fidgety. He had had his dinner at his usual hour of seven, but, as nine o'clock sounded, it struck him that Nell might expect to see supper

waiting for her, so rang the bell to order it.

‘What have you in the house? What can I have for supper?’

‘Supper, sir?’ echoed the country waiter, who though he could play a very pretty tune with a knife and fork himself, was rather taken aback at the gentleman requiring supper at nine, after a hearty dinner at seven.

‘Yes. Are you deaf? I expect my wife here soon, and she may require something to eat. What can we have?’

‘We have a joint of cold beef in the house, sir, and a veal and ham pie, and—’

‘None of those will do. I want something hot.’

‘A chicken, sir, with a cauliflower and potatoes?’ suggested the waiter.

‘Yes, yes. The best you have, whatever it may be. Get it ready as soon as you can. My wife may be here at any moment. Another bottle of that champagne too, which I had at dinner. Cursed bad stuff,’ he added to himself, as the servant

left the room, 'but women don't know the difference. Well, who would ever have thought I could have stood such discomfort as this, with so good a grace, for the sake of a woman? But *such* a woman! I don't believe she has her peer in England. As for that little sharp-featured, flirting, deceitful countess, she can't hold a candle to her. What fools and blind men are with regard to women! It is quite impossible to decide why one piece of femininity should hold them as in a vice whilst they pass over or ignore the virtues of another. Now, to my mind, Nell combines all the perfections of which human nature is capable. She is beautiful, amiable (a bit of a temper, but she very seldom shows it, and a woman is worth nothing without a spice of the devil in her), dignified, sensible, and modest. She would have made a magnificent countess; beaten Lady D—— and Lady S——, and all the other Court beauties hollow. However, I'm very glad Ilfracombe didn't see it in that light, and that the crumbs from the rich man's table

have fallen to my share. Hang it all! What a time she is. It's nearly ten. Surely she isn't going to play-off any airs and graces on me, and pose as a blushing bride. Or is it only a womanly dodge to make her welcome more assured? She needn't fear missing it. I never felt so much for any woman in my life before. I almost think, if she thought it worth her while, that she might make a better man of me. I wonder if she will learn to love me? I know what her love for that ass Ilfracombe was, and that it is worth a man's trying for. I wonder—I wonder—by Jove! that's the half-hour striking. Whatever can be the reason of this delay? Waiter,' continued Mr Portland to the man, who now appeared with the supper, 'is that half-past ten that struck just now? Surely, your clocks must be very fast.'

'Don't think so, sir! I heard the missus asking the master to put 'em on a bit just now. Do you think the lady will come to-night, sir?'

‘Of course she will! What do you mean by asking me such a question?’

‘Only, you see, sir, we’re obliged to close at eleven, whether we like or no, so the missus told me to ask you if—’

‘Here!’ exclaimed Jack Portland, quickly; ‘get me pen and ink and paper at once. I must send a messenger up to Panty-cuckoo Farm!’

‘Panty - cuckoo Farm,’ repeated the waiter; ‘Mr Llewellyn’s place? That be better than a mile and an’ arf away from here, sir. It’ll take a good bit of time to carry a letter there to-night.’

‘Never mind! I’m willing to pay for it, and for keeping you up as well, but the message must be carried by some one. Whom have you to send?’

‘I expect the ostler can go, but I’ll ask the missus,’ replied the waiter, as he went to consult the higher powers.

In a few minutes he returned to say the ostler would take the letter, and Mr Portland despatched its missive on its

way. It contained but a very few words, only, 'What is the reason of this delay? Pray come at once! Am waiting here impatiently. JACK.'

He did not know into whose hands it might fall, so thought it best to be as curt as possible, and then he sat down to get through the time as best he might till his messenger returned. How trying are the moments when we wait in utter darkness, the explanation of some mystery which is inexplicable to us. What a thousand and one fancies rush through our brain, as we attempt to penetrate what is impenetrable! How we 'think' it may be that—or we 'fancy' it must be this—or we 'fear' the other. Then, tired out with conjecture, we resolve not to think at all, but wait the natural sequence of events, only to fall back upon fancy and worry ourselves to death with imagination, and, after all, it usually turns out to be nothing—a bogy conjectured up by our anxiety—due as likely as not to the selfishness of our friend, who had not

sufficient feeling for us to suspect what we were suffering on his behalf. We have all, at some time or other, experienced the feeling of suspense under which Mr Portland was suffering now,—yes, actually *suffering*!

This selfish, immoral, dishonourable man had found his match at last in fate. Nell Llewellyn was the one creature who had ever awakened any better or higher feelings in his hardened heart, and he was suffering the agony of thinking that she might have repented of her bargain and meant to play him false as he had played so many other people. The ostler took his time to walk to Panty-cuckoo Farm. He was going to be paid for his trouble under any circumstances, so he didn't see the fun of hurrying himself. Besides, the farm was more than a mile away, and one mile makes two on a dark night, so it was twelve o'clock before the waiter reappeared with Mr Portland's own note on a salver.

‘If you please, sir, the hostler, he ’ave

been to Panty-cuckoo Farm, but everybody's a-bed, and he couldn't make no one hear.'

'Couldn't make anybody hear!' exclaimed Jack Portland, starting to his feet; 'what was the fool about? Why didn't he knock till he *did* make some one hear? What was the good of his going, when he only brings me my own note back again?'

'Well, sir; he did throw stones at the bedroom winders, but no one took no notice of 'im, so Joe, he thought, 'twas no use waiting about there any longer at this time o' night, so he bringed the note back again, and, perhaps, you'd like me to send it up the first thing in the morning.'

'No, no,' replied Jack Portland, angrily; 'the ostler is a d—d fool for his pains, and you may tell him I said so. Leave the note on the table and leave the room. I wish to be alone!'

'Are we to shut up, sir? Will the lady come to-night, do you think? The last train was in an hour ago!'

‘Shut up! shut up! Yes! Do anything you like. I don’t care so long as you leave me alone,’ was the reply.

‘Yes, sir; certainly, and what time would you like to be called in the morning, sir?’

‘Oh! go to the devil!’ cried Portland furiously, as the man disappeared, repeating his usual formula of ‘Yes, sir;’ ‘thank you, sir,’ and left him to his disappointment and conjectures.

What *could* be the matter? Where was Nell? What was she doing? What did she mean? These were the questions that repeated themselves over and over in his brain, and which received no answer till the following morning. He would have his answer then, he thought. He would go up to Panty-cuckoo Farm the very first thing and tell the Llewellyns of his marriage to their daughter, and, if need be, take his wife back with him by force. No power on earth could prevent that. But it was not the sort of honeymoon he had promised himself.

Meanwhile Lord and Lady Ilfracombe were saying to each other, as we have seen before, 'We will go over to the farm to-morrow morning and say good-bye to Nell, and tell her of all the good things we mean to do for her when she is married,' and so at last they all slept, the husband and wife locked in each other's arms—Jack Portland, restlessly, and starting up now and then to remember his disappointment with an oath, and Nell Llewellyn slept also, the sweetest and most peaceful sleep of them all.

She had gone straight home to her parents when she parted with Nora, and had passed a very pleasant evening with them. The old people had been particularly cheerful. Bonnie, the cow, had quite recovered, and was giving her milk as well as ever; and Sir Archibald Bowman had met the farmer on his way home and intimated to him that he was likely to have a change of landlords.

'I do think,' said Mr Llewellyn, 'as his lordship buying the old farm is the grandest

thing I've ever heard on, and, if it come to pass (and Sir Archibald spoke of it as a settled thing), mother and me shall feel as we owe it all to you, my lass. Sha'n't us, mother?'

'Yes, indeed,' acquiesced the old woman, 'it's all due to Nell, there's no question of that. It was a fortunate day for us when you took service with the earl, Nell, though we were both set agen you going to London at the time; but there, one never knows how things will turn out.'

Nell looked gratified by her parents' approval. She had been more serious and silent than usual that evening, but now she seemed to brighten up, and talked with them of all they should do and say when Lord Ilfracombe came to tell them of his kindness in person.

'Ay! but that will be a grand occasion,' quoth her mother; 'and you must do credit to it, my lass. I daresay the earl will bring his lady with him, and we must all put on our Sunday best to do them honour.'

‘Mother,’ said Nell presently, ‘I have something to tell you. I saw Lady Ilfracombe in the fields this afternoon, and she said that she and the earl intended to call here to-morrow morning. They are going to leave Usk Hall to-morrow afternoon, and so I daresay they will take this opportunity to tell father about the farm. You mustn’t go out to-morrow, father, till you have seen him.’

‘*I* go out,’ exclaimed the farmer, ‘on such an occasion? I should think not. Why no one in the house shall stir till they’re come and gone. Has the parlour been swept to-day, for if not you and mother will have to stay up till it’s done? I couldn’t have his lordship sitting down in a dusty room. That wouldn’t be the way to make him think us good tenants.’

‘A dusty room,’ cried the old woman indignantly. ‘We’ve been man and wife now for five-and-twenty years come Michaelmas, Griffith Llewellyn, and you can’t name the day you’ve ever seen my parlour dusty yet. The Queen herself, God bless

her, might enter it any day in the week and not soil her royal robes.

‘Well, well, wife, there’s enough words about that,’ said her husband. ‘I’m proud to hear his lordship’s coming to Pantycuckoo, and glad that Nell gave us warning of it. Did you find an opportunity to ask if there’s a chance of your entering the earl’s service again, my girl?’ he continued to his daughter.

Nell left her seat and approached her father’s side, winding her arm round the old man’s neck, and laying her cheek gently against his. ‘No, dear father,’ she said, ‘I didn’t mention the subject. I don’t think I shall ever go to service again, dear. I am not so strong as I was, and it would be too hard for me.’

She strangled a kind of sob in her throat as she proceeded:—

‘I have been a great burden on you for the last year, father; but I won’t be so much longer. If I can’t go to service, I will provide for myself some way, don’t fear that.’

‘Ay, my lass, it will be as well. You’re a bonny lass, there’s no denying, but you don’t seem to care much for marriage, and when your mother and me is gone you’ll have a sore shift to provide for yourself if you have no work to do. I mentioned his lordship’s service because it seems to me as if it has left you pretty well unfit for anything else. Your hands and face and your constitoo-tion ain’t fit for a farm-house, Nell, and that’s the truth. They improved you and they spiled you both up in London. You’re fitter for the town than the country, any one could see that with half an eye. But you’re a good girl, my dear, and mother and me, we both say that.’

‘Thank you, father,’ she replied, as she kissed him several times, more times than were necessary, according to the rough old farmer’s ideas—and then did the same by her mother.

‘Good-night, dear, dear mother,’ she murmured fervently. ‘You’ve been a good mother to your poor, thoughtless, useless Nell.’

‘Ay, that I have,’ replied Mrs Llewellyn, with the beautiful self-assurance of the poor, ‘but you’re worth it all the same.’

‘Thank you, dear, God bless you,’ said Nell gently, as she prepared to leave the room. At the door she turned and stood regarding the two old people with her lovely hazel eyes, as if she could not gaze enough at them.

‘You’re a rare fool,’ cried her mother gaily. ‘There, run away to your bed, do, and get up wiser in the morning.’

And then, as her daughter with a solemn smile disappeared, she remarked to her husband,—

‘I’m sometimes half afeared, father, if that girl ain’t a bit mazed. She do look at one so queer with them big eyes of hers. Did you notice her just now?’

‘Not I,’ replied the farmer. ‘I’ve other things to do besides noticing a maid’s eyes. So now come along to bed, wife, and forget all such rubbish, for we’ll have to be up betimes to make ready to receive his lordship.’

And the old couple went up to their room, laughing and cackling as they passed Nell's door.

And as they did so the clock struck nine.

She heard it as she stood in her bedroom, with her hands clasped in front of her, dazed and bewildered. The world seemed to have closed on her with her parents' good-night kisses—all the people in it appeared to have become indistinct and blurred. They were fading away before her mental vision one by one—the Earl and his Countess, Jack Portland, Hugh Owen, her father and mother, Hetty, everyone. Nell felt she had done with them all for ever. At one moment she thought of writing to Hugh Owen. He had loved her and had great hopes of her, and she had dashed them all aside. She was sorry for his disappointment and his broken faith. Should she write and tell him so. But what could she say, except that the man he saw her with was her former lover, and if he dis-

covered him to be the earl, there would be another unpleasantness for Ilfracombe. Oh, no! Her life had been all a muddle and a mistake, it was best to leave it so. She could not unravel it, and the more she touched it the more entangled it became. Best to remain silent to the last. Not a thought of Portland entered her head. She had made a certain compact with him, and she had meant to end it like this all along. But she moved across the room with a soft lingering step, and eyes that seemed already covered with the film of death, and gazed from the window that looked towards the house where Ilfracombe was sleeping.

‘Good-bye,’ she murmured indistinctly, ‘good-bye.’

And then Nell turned away, and taking hold of a chair, dragged it to the wardrobe, and mounting on it took down the bottle of poison for which her mother had told her to write a label.

END.

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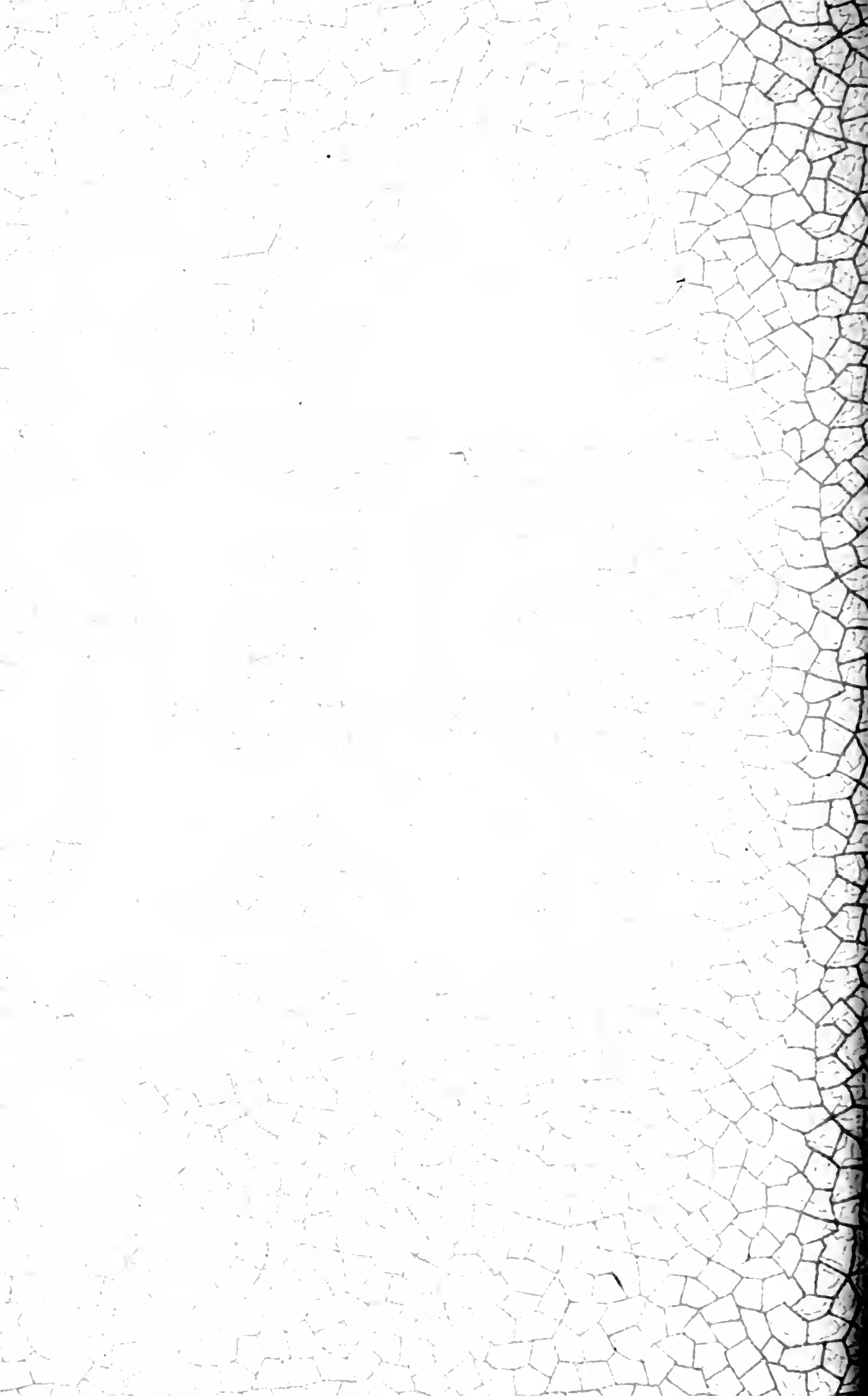
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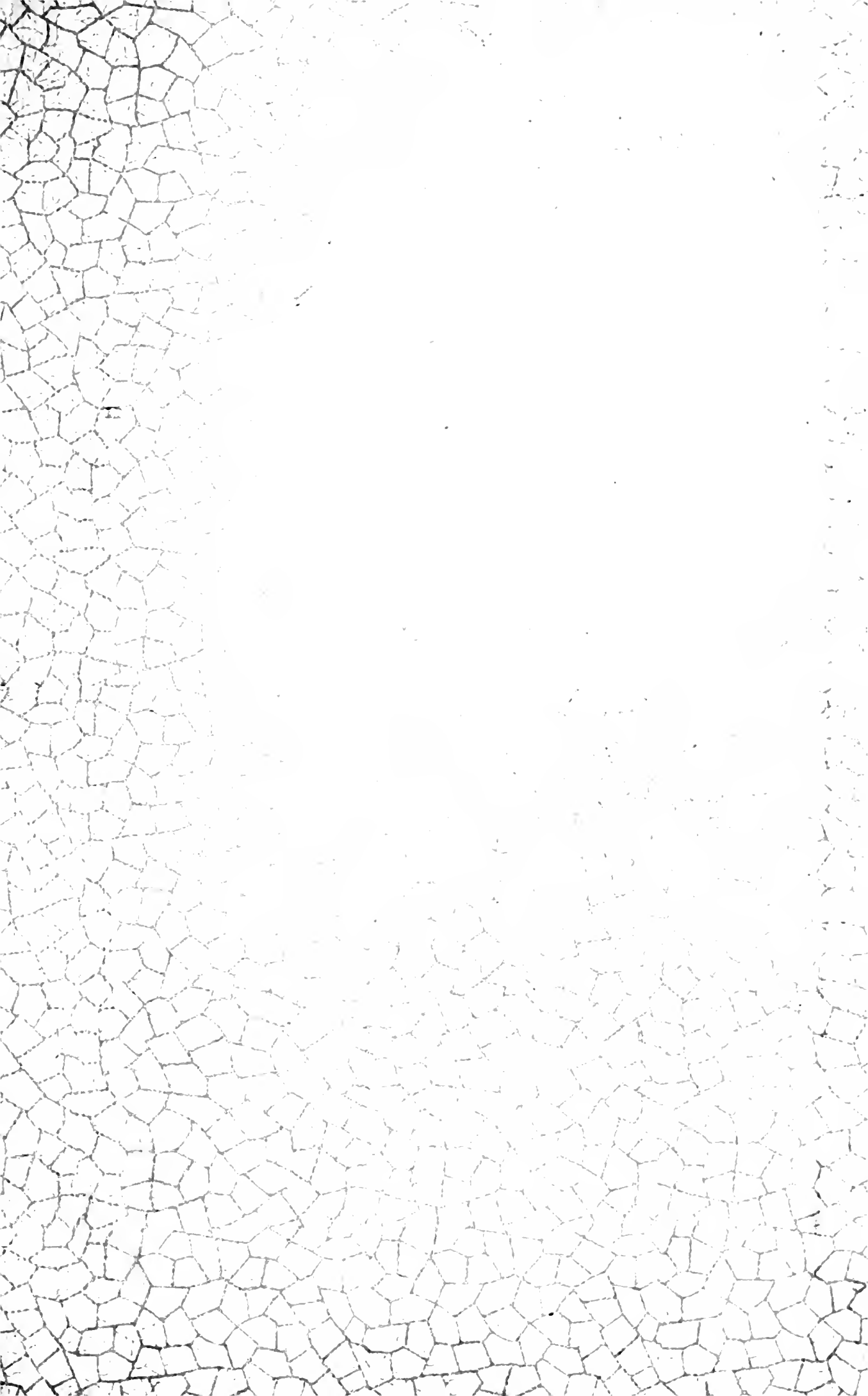
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